

# MUSIC IN THE SHADOWS

Jazz, Race & Ideology in Classical Film Noir



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# Introduction

I sometimes wonder why the French term ‘film noir’ was never translated into English in American academia and popular culture. Why keep a foreign name for an ingeniously American style? To honor the French writers who originally coined the term? Maybe. Because ‘noir’ sounded fancier than any English equivalent word that might be used? Probably. But if these answers are unsatisfactory, another possible explanation lies in the fact that ‘noir,’ of course, is ‘black’ in the English language. In the late 1960s, when white American intellectuals first started writing on the subject, ‘black’ held very delicate meanings in U.S. society, meanings that they might not want their unique film phenomenon to be associated with. ‘Black film’ would have invited the analysis of blacks in film and, more specifically, encouraged the examination of race in what we have come to know as film noir. Ironically, questions of race and racial ideology in classical film noir remain relatively unexplored. This is, of course, partly because racial and ethnic outsiders rarely appear in the original cycle. Although New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, indeed archetypical noir cities, had large black populations in the immediate postwar years, few African-Americans made it to the screens of film noir. Which is another unfortunate irony given that noir has always been celebrated for its realism and so-called honest view of American life. The lack of racial minorities in the noir versions of these cities mismatched the actual look of these cities in real life. But underrepresentation, though it can signify invisibility, does not equal absence. Black players do occasionally surface in classical noir, primarily as jazz musicians performing in sleazy, haze-filled nightclubs, speakeasies, and basement joints. It is in these arenas, which Vivian Sobchack calls the “concrete grounds” and “rented space” of film noir, that the canon’s “cultural truth” is exposed (in Browne 1998: 137). In terms of race, noir nightclubs suggest cultural truth by hinting towards urban diversity/multiculturality and by frequently dramatizing, in their own unique ways, the domination of racial minorities. Jazz allowed nonwhite characters an onscreen profession and a presence in the reel cityscapes of film noir, but jazz and film noir have always been considered uneasy relatives. The prevalence of jazz in film noir is informed by the white perception of the music as primitive, sexualized, and animalistic. In short, as ‘black.’ Jazzclubs often serve as figurative or even literal portals into dangerous and decadent worlds. The white



protagonist's pathway to ultimate deterioration sometimes begins here, evident in films such as *Out of the Past* (1947) and *D.O.A.* (1949). In these and other pictures, jazz represents the menace of otherness, loose sexuality, and deadly criminality. Black music creates a racial source for the dark immorality that awaits and weights the white male antihero. With the primitive connotations and mysticism jazz maintained in the white imagination, it seemed to impeccably complement the themes and aesthetics that noir filmmakers aimed to convey. Despite only appearing in a handful of film noirs, jazz has left such a strong imprint that it, in retrospect, has become closely associated with the dark and sinister mood of the cycle. Jazz has become a part of the noir aesthetic. But jazz musicians don't always signify danger and immorality; sometimes they offer solace and relief for exhausted and existential white protagonists. Similarly, African-American musical artists aren't always stereotyped, sometimes they come across as genuine human beings who appear to be friends with or at least acquainted with white leading characters. In fact, white esteem for black music and noble interracial encounters are frequently included to demarcate white hipness. Mixed-race exchanges, however sympathetic they are made out to be, ultimately celebrate the distinctive rootlessness of the white male protagonist and his ability to transgress contemporaneous racial and social boundaries. In short, they boost the already privileged status of whiteness. Noir jazz, then, is usually either othered or admired by white filmmakers. Both modes of address, moreover, arguably suture dominant racial ideology and elevate foregrounded white identities. Film noir relocates and appropriates jazz to the benefit of a eurocentric noir aesthetic rather than advancing and acknowledging the makers of the music. Jazz seldomly comments on black existence and struggle in classical noir. Rather, it tends to signify danger, violence, sex, and hipness.

This study, as you might have gathered, looks for jazz musicians performing on screen in classical film noir. More than the sound itself, it is really the sight and sociability of jazz that is emphasized here (though the influence of sound cannot be completely disregarded). I look for jazz performed in nightclubs, bars, speakeasies, and basement joints, investigating its placement within the noir narrative and in the context of the social and musical developments of its time. Indeed, the civil rights movement, the beat generation, and the modern jazz revolution are all relevant historical events that coincided with the classical era of film noir and affected dominant orientations towards jazz in the postwar years. It is crucial to understand noir jazz in the context of these events. I explore how film noir utilizes jazz, the potential motivations behind these utilizations, and how they might be informed by myths, stereotypes, and dominant racial ideology. My intention is to

unveil how representations of jazz and interracial encounters communicate something smaller about the larger ideological nature of film noir which, on surface label, is commonly viewed as a relatively leftist and ideologically subversive phenomenon. How subversive is film noir when it comes to racial concerns? It is not the intention of this work, however, to manifest any conclusory remarks about jazz, race, and ideology in this film category. My purpose is not to conclude any given representation as ‘positive’ or ‘negative,’ but to recognize ongoing social and cinematic tendencies and examine the complexities inherent in these tendencies. Similarly, this thesis is not ‘about’ race per se, but about mixed-race relations in a historical period of time when race had an unfortunate and compound impact on society, culture, and arts. I maintain a relativized, non-essentialist approach, discussing films from multiple angles and making a case for the often ambiguous ways that jazz is portrayed and employed in film noir. To understand the compound ways in which the intersection of jazz, race, and ideology oscillates through the noir cycle, it is necessary to see through the films and their individual strategies of production and representation. Figuratively speaking, it becomes a matter of seeing through the dark shadows of film noir.

Chapter 1, titled “Context, Method, & Theory,” provides contexts for the contemporaneous social, cultural, and musical streams that coincided with the rise of film noir. It is essential to familiarize oneself with these contexts in order to properly grasp the functions of jazz in classical Hollywood cinema. I also offer relevant histories for both jazz and film noir, identify preexisting literature on the subjects, and speculate as to why jazz sustains such an ongoing presence in the cycle. The methodologies and theoretical perspectives that have molded this project are also highlighted and discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 2, titled “The Horns Blowing in the Clubs: Jazz & Band Music in ‘40s Noir,” examines the representations of diegetic jazz in nightclubs from the first decade of film noir. I explore the thematic and aesthetic positioning of jazz in relation to the noir narrative and in terms of the perspective from which the music is perceived. My main argument, which is backed up by the clear intent evident in certain screenplays, is that film noir displaces racial primitivist myths about jazz to have the music signify the characteristic decadence and anxiety of noir. I start with a discussion of *Blues in the Night* (1941), a musical noir that, in addition to initiate the pervasiveness of jazz in film noir, is prototypical of the often cynical ways that Hollywood has historically treated black musicians onscreen. Other films discussed in this chapter include *When Strangers Marry*

(1944), *The Dark Corner* (1946), *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Out of the Past* (1947), *D.O.A.* (1949), and *Force of Evil* (1949). I engage with the screenplay material for most of these films, disclosing the often primitive descriptions of jazz at script level and comparing these descriptions to the filmed nightclub sequences that are based on them.

Chapter 3, titled “I’d Rather Have the Blues: The Singers & Songs of Film Noir,” inspects how piano blues singers are depicted in film noir and explores the functions of the blues within the noir chronotope. Looking primarily at films in the timespan of 1949-1955, which in chronological terms roughly overlaps with the previous chapter, I argue that film noir relies on the intuitive and intellectual currency of African-American blues to convey narrative and character conditions that otherwise wouldn’t have been permitted to be conveyed by black artists at this point in time. Hence, film noir frequently provides sophisticated and refined representations of black female singers that were antithetical to the more sexualized and objectifying representations of singers such as Lena Horne and Hazel Scott constructed by more established Hollywood genres. Unlike male band music, which predominantly signifies danger, violence, and anxiety, the blues offer a refreshing room of relief and reflection for fatigued and existential white antiheroes. I argue that the depressed mood of the blues holds a particular resonance to the dispiriting themes of film noir, a resonance that is enabled to thrive in the cycle thanks to the music’s uniquely crafted social awareness and sensitivity.

Chapter 4, titled “All Men Are Evil: Modern Jazz & the Black Musician as Protagonist,” discusses representations of jazzclubs in the noirs of the late ‘50s, the last few years of classical film noir. This chapter overlays chronologically with the one that preceded it, focusing on the late noirs *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *I Want to Live!* (1958), and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). A lot had changed, both socially, musically, and cinematically, since primitive and stereotypical representations of jazz delineated the films of the heyday noir years. By the time of the later phase of classical noir, the civil rights movement was well underway, a modern jazz revolution had emerged, and Hollywood was embracing more dignified and humane visual portrayals of racial minorities. These historical developments opened for the abandonment of jazz-related myths/stereotypes and for black musicians to be accepted by the film industry as professional artists. In the late noirs that are discussed here, jazz musicians appear detached and cool, play modern jazz in interracial nightclubs, and even contribute to the nondiegetic soundtracks of certain

films (though, for scope constrictions, the latter point is not emphasized here). I first discuss the jazzclubs in *Sweet Smell of Success* and *I Want to Live!*, unveiling how these representations break with previous representations of jazz and reflect the socio-cultural climate of their time. Lastly, I investigate the Harry Belafonte produced film *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the last classical noir yet the first to feature a black protagonist, and how it, with distinctive social and musical black sensibilities, utilizes well-worn noir conventions even as it anticipates the African-American centered neo-noirs that were to come in its near future.

# Chapter 1

## Context, Method, & Theory

### 1.1 What is Film Noir?

Coined by French critics in the immediate postwar years, film noir primarily refers to American crime pictures made in the 1940s and 1950s. With their rain-soaked streets, pessimistic characters, smoky nightclubs, and criminal underworlds, noir offered dark and cynical outlooks on American life both during wartime and following the second world war. The protagonist, typically a middle-age existentialist with little to live for, tends to be more interested in the past than in the future. He disdains from looking ahead, trying to survive day by day and, if unsuccessful, he retreats to the past. Hence, film noir characteristically employs flashback narration, told through the voiceover of the protagonist. We often learn from the outset that something has gone terribly wrong for the male antihero; the films become a matter of telling *how* everything went so wrong. His fatalistic outcome is partially triggered by his involvement with a femme fatale, the seductive woman who allures him into the underworld. The dark and sinister mood of noir is ingeniously complemented by the use of a black-and-white cinematography consisting of heavy shadows and distorted camera angles.

Scholars have historically disagreed on scopes and parameters of film noir. Some critics straightforwardly manifest it as a film genre, just like the horror film or the western. Other writers, however, are more hesitant towards handing it genre status. They contend that film noir lacks specific genre conventions that consistently run through its body of pictures. First, far from all noirs take place in urban settings; some stories take place in suburbs and rural areas, meaning that setting cannot be determinant of genre. Indeed, some of the films I discuss, such as *Blues in the Night* (1941) and *They Live By Night* (1949), feature jazzclubs that are located outside the major urban metropolises. Second, although private eyes and femme fatales frequently drive the narratives of noir, many of the films include neither, providing no clear character basis for genre classification. Third, if we are to follow the wide conception that classical film noir is a time-bound phenomenon, it shouldn't be considered a genre because established genres are never confined to

specific time periods. Which brings us to the problem of parameters. Borde and Chaumeton, in the first book ever written on the subject, remark that film noir emerged with *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and culminated with *Kiss Me Deadly* in 1955. American scholars later expanded the scope, either to *Touch of Evil* (1958) or *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). Other critics refuse to historicize film noir to a particular time frame, contending that noir is a timeless mood or style that transcends mediums, genres, and discourses. Despite perhaps lacking certain genre conventions, however, film noirs do have a particular look about them missing in other genre films. It might not be enough to call it a genre, but there is a sense to which you recognize a film noir when you see one. Noir might best be described as a canon of films that share a certain style, theme, and subject matter that give them, in the words of Borde and Chaumeton, “an unmistakable character.” My favorite attempt at defining film noir, however, was made by Nino Frank in 1946, before Borde and Chaumeton wrote their quintessential book. In his article “A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure,” which was the article that coined the term ‘film noir,’ Frank perceptively remarked:

In this manner these ‘noir’ films no longer have any common ground with run-of-the-mill police dramas. Markedly psychological plots, violent or emotional action, have less impact than facial expressions, gestures, utterances - rendering the truth of the characters, that ‘third dimension’ of which I have already spoken (in Silver & Ursini 1999: 18).

Frank’s observations are astonishingly incisive for 1946 (the noir era had barely begun) and resonate malleably with my own analysis of the exchanges occurring between white antiheroes and jazzclubs/musicians. In these mixed-race exchanges, it is precisely facial expressions, gestures, and utterances that often render the truth of characters and, by extension, where the racial ideology of noir is embedded. By examining these delicate physiognomies, I partly unveil the complex and varying stances noir took towards race and jazz in the immediate postwar years.

Several founding studies on film noir site jazz as one of the cycle’s distinctive iconographies. Jon Tuska writes that “jazz combos featured in a number of *films noirs*” and became one of the “traditional characteristics of visual noir” (1984: 88, 214). Fred Pfeil, similarly, identifies “lurid jazzy bars” as one of the “constitutive features” of the noir canon (in Copjec 1993: 229). Silver and Ursini also manifest “blues and jazz” as “traditional signifiers in *noir*” (1996: 281). R. Barton Palmer describes “seedy clubs with moody jazz” as integral to the cycle, while Frank Krutnik

proposes that “neon and jazz” belongs to “the iconography of the 1940s *noir* city” (1996: 158; in Clarke 1997: 85). Edward Dimendberg categorizes “the nightclub with its jazz orchestra” as a “classic film noir trope,” suggesting that “it is the rare film noir without a scene in which jazz or vocal music is performed” (2004: 304, 92). Common for all these studies, however, is that they provide very few, if not none, examples for when and how jazz is represented in film noir. They only mention it in passing. My thesis aim to materialize some of these statements, unveiling how dominant racial beliefs may structure representations of jazz in the original noir canon.

It should still be clarified, as David Butler (2002) remarks, that jazz refrains from surfacing as frequently in noir as the popular imagination believes, especially when it comes to the nondiegetic soundtracks. Butler explains that although one might expect sleazy saxophones and rhythmic drums to accompany these tales of immorality and corruption, because “film noir and jazz seemed ‘to belong together,’” this is far from the case (2002: 2). Yes, jazz was sometimes used to score classical noir, but not as often as modern day audiences may assume. Its absence from the history of film music can be explained by the dominant racism that tinged the Hollywood system and the success of classical music in film scoring practices. The insistent association between jazz and film noir, however, is due to the fact that they are both historical signifiers for the same things: violence, sex, urban life, and decadence. The supposedly consistent relationship between the two art styles is therefore, according to Butler, “a retrospective illusion” (2002: 194). John Orr would agree, claiming that “noir movies of the 1940s consistently ignored black Americans” and that “African-American music” was “conspicuously missing” from the original noir canon (1993: 179). Black jazz musicians were mostly denied film scoring opportunities in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Instead they were reduced to incidental background figures in nightclubs and basement joints, appropriated by white filmmakers to signify the characteristic urban dangers and anxieties of noir narratives.

## 1.2 Origins of Film Noir

Paul Schrader (1972) lists four forces that motivated the emergence of film noir in the early ‘40s. The first force, which he calls “war and post-war disillusionment,” refers to the fear and pessimism American society suffered from experiencing their country at war (1972: 9). Soldiers returning to home soil, in particular, experienced anxiety over witnessing that women had taken the jobs they previously occupied and, by extension, over that women were gaining increasing power in society.

Film noir echoes this tendency by depicting disenchanted war-veterans surrounded by empowered women who trick them into a life of crime and deception. Given the lack of racial and ethnic others in classical noir, otherness tends to be displaced onto female characters. Women bring out most of the anxieties in their male counterparts. This distinctive anxiousness, however, may also derive from various migrations, such as The Great Migration (1910-1970), where millions of African-Americans migrated from the rural south to northern urban cities. Changing racial demographics ‘polluted’ northern whiteness; the perspective from which noir narratives are told. Deborah Thomas remarks:

The characteristic anxiety provoked by the contemporary urban setting of *film noir* has its roots, at least in part, in a response to the waves of immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which seemed to make the city no longer the locus of American ‘civilization’ (a native version of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism) but rather of an antithetical ‘otherness’ (in Cameron 1992: 61).

As noted, racial minorities do occasionally surface in film noir as jazz musicians. In the northern cities in which they appear, jazz is othered in ways that not only generate white male anxiety but also preserve the status of whiteness.

Schrader calls the second originating force “post-war realism” (1972: 10). Following the war, American moviegoers desired a level of authenticity that was lacking in the sophisticated melodramas of the ‘30s. In contrast to the confident and flawless heroes in other Hollywood genres, citizens called for a more realistic view of American life from the perspectives of everyday people in the streets. Instead of artificially created studio sets, spectators wanted actual locations, such as real streets, alleys, and nightclubs. Film noir is renowned for encapsulating an aura of realism missing in other Hollywood genres. But its alleged realism can certainly be questioned when it comes to its representations (or lack thereof) of African-Americans. If film noir captures “streets with everyday people,” as Schrader suggests, it captures streets with everyday white people. As opposed to America’s real-life metropolises, which by the late ‘40s were considerably multiracial, the noired reproductions of these cities are predominantly white. And if racial minorities appear in noir, they are mostly shaped and constructed from the point of view of everyday white people.



The third force, which Schrader labels “the German influence,” involves the inspiration that film noir took from the aesthetics of German Expressionist cinema (1972: 10). Known for its deep blending of shadow and light, often creating rich silhouettes, German Expressionism had a profound impact on the visual style of noir. Its high contrast lighting seamlessly complemented the noir canon’s themes of darkness and despair. It has been argued that sensationalized expressionism mismatched the touch of realism in film noir. Schrader still asserts that expressionism and realism, indeed two conflicting elements, form “an uneasy, exhilarating combination” and establish “the unique quality of film noir.” But as I show in this work, the artificial interplay of shadows and lighting complicates the representations of jazz musicians in the cycle. The expressionist visual style alters facial realism and adds racial layers of meaning to their location within the noir narrative, theme, and aesthetic.

The fourth and final force contributing to the rise of film noir is, according to Schrader, “the hard-boiled tradition (ibid). Several of the most well-known noirs were adapted from the literary works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain. Their works of fiction, most of which written in the ‘30s, introduced the thematic bleakness and depression that Hollywood’s adaptations later capitalized on. They essentially gave birth to the cool, careless, and nonconforming antiheroes that have become archetypes in American popular culture. For Chandler, the noir figure had to “be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man ... He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world” (in Silver & Ursini 2004: 147). Chandler’s description gives the noir protagonist almost unattainable attributes. In a way, he is antihero and superhero all at once. He is humane, affectionless, and familiar with any segment of urban society. The geographic and cultural versatility of white protagonists, as exemplified by Bogart and Mitchum, sometimes go at the expense of representations of racial outsiders. Since noir protagonists are rootless drifters, accustomed to all regions of the city, they must also show off their conversancy with black culture. As I highlight in this study, their frequency in black nightclubs and admiration for jazz do more for the completion of their hipster image than for the representations of the music and its makers. Film noir makes sure to emphasize that the white protagonist is a unique individual who, irrespective of the racially stratified world he lives in, has friends and acquaintances racially and ethnically different than himself.

### 1.3 Film Noir & Ideology

Most scholars seem to agree that film noir is an ideologically subversive phenomenon. Borde and Chaumeton concluded in 1955 that “film noir has fulfilled its role, which was to create a particular sense of malaise and to transmit a social critique of the United States” (2002: 155). Raymond Durgnat, one of the very first English noir scholars, gave noir “a slightly exotic ring” because “it appears as figure against the rosy ground of Anglo-Saxon middle-class, and especially Hollywoodian, optimism and puritanism” (In Silver and Ursini 1996: 37). While Durgnat’s assessment holds accuracy, it is difficult, at least for my own purposes, to consider the white heterosexual male, the perspective from which we follow noir storylines, as exotic. What is exotic is the mystical figures that he encounters, such as femme fatales, potential homosexuals and, in our case, jazz musicians. Michael Walker, in the same vein, writes that film noir exhibits “a generally more critical and subversive view of American ideology than the norm” (In Cameron 1992: 8). Philip Kemp goes further, implying that “these pictures share a set of implicit, perhaps even inadvertent attitudes to society which readily lend themselves to interpretation as left-wing” (1986: 268). Though several of the films I discuss were made by liberal and leftist directors, such as Robert Rossen, Joseph Losey, and Fritz Lang, I sometimes struggle to see how their works don’t conform to dominant and indeed racialized myths of black derived jazz. JP Telotte suggests that “film noir advances a sort of ideological criticism ... laying bare systemic contradictions ... by embracing rather than disguising paradoxes” (1989: 34). My argument, however, is that depictions of jazz and race complicate all these assertions regarding ideology in film noir. To my mind, racial discourse is disguised rather than embraced. I am further hesitant towards attempting to deduct the ideological nature of film noir since ideology fluctuates so uneasily and ambiguously throughout the cycle. Carl Richardson, similarly, refuses to provide a finalized conclusion on this issue. Richardson asks modestly: “What was the ‘ideology and style’ of the *film noir* ‘wave’? A good guess is that it had none, that it was neither left nor right, certainly not communist, and for the most part not particularly anti-communist” (1992: 7). For Richardson, “questions of ideology lurked in the background” (ibid: 8). Film noir is seldomly explicit and upfront about racial and other socio-political matters. It is therefore no easy way to delineate the ideological forces intrinsic in noir. The safest call for now might be to characterize the category as, in the words of Mike Davis, “an ideologically ambiguous aesthetic” (2006: 41).

## 1.4 Film Noir & Race: Existing Literature

This section identifies the key studies that have been undertaken on the subject of race in classical film noir. Some of these entries, moreover, prove to have slightly different objectives and outcomes. The exploration of racial themes began with Eric Lott's "The Whiteness of Film Noir" (1997). Lott is, in an approach not dissimilar from my own, recognizing a conservation of white identities in film noir. Lott argues that the noir shadows added onto white characters conceal and preserve their beneathly intact whiteness. The consistent nearness of black players, moreover, covertly implicate African-Americans in the immoral actions of whites. For Lott, blacks and other nonwhites appear "at more key moments in more films than can easily be written off as exceptions," continuing that "film noir rescues with racial idioms the whites whose moral and social boundaries seem so much in doubt. 'Black film' is the refuge of whiteness" (1997: 545-46). Lott's analysis is applicable to numerous film noirs and serves as partial template for my own study. Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, however, believe that Lott "oversimplifies" racial anxiety in the noir cycle: "Racial ambiguity, not the fear of blackness, is the real anxiety of noir .. the fear of not being able to tell the difference between blackness and whiteness" (2002: 5). For Oliver and Trigo, ambiguity and anxiety over race is created by the fact that, on the one hand, "black characters are visibly white" and, on the other, that "white characters are visibly black." Visual manipulations of skin color manifest "a fear of the inability to distinguish between black and white, a fear of 'lost boundaries' between races" (ibid: 15). Though they disagree with Lott, and though neither works discuss jazz, I find both perspectives pertinent to my own analysis of the sight of jazz in noir. In alignment with Lott, there is undoubtedly a sense to which whiteness is conserved through racially charged noir cinematography and the close proximity of racially black players. African-Americans, and in my case rhythmically loose jazz musicians, are even further implicated in the crime narrative through being allocated the same noir shadows that debased white characters are. Specific spatial, sequential, and aesthetic choices are all evocative of a fear of blackness in film noir. But there is also, as Oliver and Trigo identify, a racial ambiguity at play. Black characters aren't always shadowed; sometimes they are indeed whitened. My film analysis demonstrates the uneasy logic that when jazz performers evince a certain refinement, sophistication, or intellect, they earn the 'privilege' to be visually reproduced as 'white.' Whether blacks are shadowed for the purpose of demonization, or whitened for the sake of humanization, there is an unfortunate

premise that whiteness always wins regardless. In later neo-noirs, when narratives began to center around the struggles of African-Americans, Manthia Diawara argues that “the light shed on them is meant to render them visible, not white” (in Copjec 1993: 263). But Diawara’s assertion speaks much less for classical noir where lightened black players are largely ignored and at best provided a few moments for auxiliary musical interludes. In the original cycle, lighting whitens and appropriates black characters more than it grants them visibility. The exception might be *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), the last noir of the classical era, where Harry Belafonte plays a jazz musician that forms the center of the film’s storyline. Charles Scruggs has also undertaken various semiotic studies of race in film noir. Scruggs’ focus is primarily on the correlation between the narratives of classical noir and the literature of African-Americans. Scruggs argues that noir antiheroes can be understood as surrogate figures for African-Americans. Since filmmakers could not portray black leading characters and authentically dramatize racial struggle, “they found a way of speaking in ‘code’, confiding secrets to those in the audience willing to listen and observe” (in Pettey & Palmer 2014: 165). Noir characters, through their social isolation from the worlds they live in, may speak on behalf of outcasted racial minorities. “A white character can mirror a black condition,” Scruggs writes, asserting that “more than one black writer could identify with noir heroes even though they were white” (ibid: 165, 179). He utilizes *Out of the Past* (1947) as the main example for his argument, a film he reads as a fugitive slave narrative: “that narrative is the coded tale of the fugitive slave, a tale that only gets told through indirection and nuance” (Scruggs 2011: 98). Kathie is the ‘slave’ who has escaped Whit’s plantation, and Jeff is the ‘slavecatcher’ hired to bring her back to his green pastures. Scruggs’ analysis is partially accessed through the brief presence of Kathie’s black maid who Jeff questions early on in the film. Indeed, Scruggs’ detailed and convincing essays heighten my conviction that African-Americans could have made the perfect antiheroes and femme fatales in classical noir, if only Hollywood had allowed them. Unfortunately, one can only imagine for oneself the lives and obstacles of the jazz musicians who occupy the backgrounds of noir nightclubs. Although Scruggs’ analysis is most concerned with what we do not see, “the hidden presence of race” in noir, it somewhat explains the short yet frequent appearances of jazz in the cycle (ibid: 99). White protagonists’ mingling with jazz musicians certainly draw racial counterparts closer together, helping us access the ‘hidden’ racial overlapping that Scruggs analogizes in his essays. The existentialist detour of the white male antihero hypothetically reflects the social seclusion of the briefly visible black jazz artist. This

does not, however, eradicate the tropes of otherness and hipness that jazz signifies in film noir. Julian Murphet is, like Scruggs, interested in how racial discourse informs film noir even without the presence of racial minorities. For Murphet, the racism of noir lies not in its stereotypical portrayals or racial othering, but in the absence of nonwhite characters from the urban cityscapes. Murphet notes how the lack of racial minorities in the cities of film noir reverses the multiracial look of postwar urban America. In the '40s and '50s, the urban cities that film noir is situated in had significantly large black populations. Murphet writes: "The absence, that is, of black citizens from noir's 'everyday' space, is a repression from the space of representation" (1998: 28). This absence, moreover, indicates another type of racial anxiety in noir, one which is so fearful of blackness that it has to exclude African-Americans almost completely from the film category. Film noir deviates from dealing explicitly with racial issues. Rather, it displaces racial anxiety, or as Murphet calls it, "a racial unconscious," onto more acceptable targets of representation, such as jazz music, chiaroscuro-based cinematography, communism, and femme fatales. In particular, Murphet understands noir cinematography "as a reified confrontation of abstract racial entities" (ibid: 30-31). But as I demonstrate, the noir style is not only a displaced signifier of race but also sometimes utilized directly on jazz musicians to implicate them in the noir chronotope. While chiaroscuro and low-key lighting primarily accentuate the moral decay of whites, these visual techniques may also stylistically implicate minor black players in this very deterioration. Unlike Scruggs and Murphet, who are chiefly interested in how race informs film noir even without the sight of racial outsiders, James Naremore takes a more straightforward approach to racial representations in the original cycle. Naremore charts the appearances of nonwhite characters in some of the most famous noirs and discusses their performative qualities. Since film noir is considered a product of radical creatives and thrived during the beginnings of the civil rights movement, Naremore notes that the cycle includes black characters that are humanized and non-stereotyped. He goes: "Some black players in the 1940s were treated in relatively dignified ways ... a conscious effort was made to avoid depicting them as the minstrel show caricatures or comic illiterates of the 1930s" (1998: 237, 240). Naremore references many of the films that I discuss in more detail, such as *Out of the Past*, *D.O.A.*, *In a Lonely Place* and *Kiss Me Deadly*. He briefly discusses some of their nightclub sequences, characterizing them as liberal sequences that promote interaction between races. While Naremore's performative perspective is much welcomed, highlighting sequences that have previously been ignored by noir scholars, I show that these

sequences must be read in terms of more criteria than just dramatic performance. The racial discourse of noir nightclubs is informed not only by character interaction but also by semiotic components of the mise-en-scene, such as camera work, point-of-view, lighting, decoration, and sound. Nightclubs can also be read in terms of their sequencing within the noir narrative (at what points during the films do they surface?) and in light of their screenplay descriptions. Do the scripts include dominant assumptions of race and jazz, and are these assumptions carried out in the films? These are some additional questions I seek to answer in this study. Dan Flory has also undertaken a performative analysis of representations of race in film noir. Flory, not dissimilar from Oliver and Trigo, believes that Lott is “totalizing” the function of nonwhite characters in noir, but for different reasons: “*film noir* provides a catalog of many different stances that whites took in regard to race, ranging from white racial paranoia, which Lott perceptively identifies, to far more liberal, at times perhaps radical, outlooks on race” (2008: 35). In his studies on noir, Flory leans towards the conclusion that there are more “positive” attitudes toward race relations in film noir than scholars have previously recognized. Although “ethnicity and race also manifest themselves negatively in classic noir,” Flory asserts that the noir canon possesses an “overall positive stance toward these categories of human subdivision” (in Spicer & Hanson 2013: 387-8). While Flory’s examinations are credible in the sense that noir sometimes avoids racial stereotyping, one should be careful pursuing absolutist approaches that divide representations of minorities into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ groupings. Remember that these depictions of nonwhites were constructed by whites and, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam advice, one should always ask oneself the question: “positive for whom?” (1994: 203). What a white filmmaker or critic consider a positive representation might be a negative one for members of the race in question. Besides, as I argue in this work, there are additional factors, such as the ideological nature of the apparatus and the contemporaneous racial climate both in society and in the film industry, that shape the racial ideology of classical film noir. These factors sometimes even lay beyond the creative control of the filmmakers. Flory views the liberal persona of Humphrey Bogart as integral to the ‘positive’ stance that film noir takes on race relations. He impressively charts nearly if not every encounter Bogart has with a racial or ethnic outsider in film noir. In all his mixed-race interactions, Bogart communicates respectfully and sympathetically with minority characters. Flory writes that the actor’s capacity to treat nonwhites “more fairly than was deemed socially requisite meant that Bogart’s relatively ‘liberal’ values were allowed to emerge as crucial dimensions of his stardom”

(in Spicer & Hanson 2013: 390). But as I equally demonstrate, the white protagonist's comradeship with blacks, and especially admiration for jazz, concurrently enhance his distinctive rootlessness and hipsterism while also celebrating his allegedly liberal whiteness. Film noir occasionally offers progressive interracial encounters, but these encounters exhibit certain backlashing effects that require further examination.

The arguments that are made for race can also be applied to representations of jazz in the noir cycle. Robert Porfirio's influential article, "Dark Jazz: Music in the Film Noir" (1999), located in Silver's and Ursini's "Film Noir Reader 2," is the first study to examine the functions of jazz in classical noir. Porfirio's reading of jazz is analogous to Eric Lott's analysis of racial themes in the canon. He writes that the music's "unfortunate association with brothels, speak-easies and 'dope,'" indeed stemming back to the New Orleans era of the '20s, was appropriated by noir filmmakers who "in turn reinforced its association with sex, violence and death" (in Silver & Ursini 1999: 177). Porfirio applies his analogy to a limited selection of pictures, but, as I show, the association between jazz and these forms of promiscuity extend to more films and in more ways than his introductory study proposes. He continues that noir "capitalized on these associations, emphasizing the strident and violent aspects of the music over its warm and sentimental side" (ibid). While his claim holds credibility in most cases, I also discuss the ways in which jazz, and especially the blues, provide warm and succoring atmospheres for desolated and resigned white protagonists. David Butler shares Porfirio's view, concurring that the tendency in the original cycle was "to portray the sexual, rhythmic, impulsive aspects of jazz (the very aspects upon which the white culture industry mythologized jazz as dark, exotic, forbidden music)" (2002: 70). Butler's book offers groundbreaking insights into the usages of jazz in film noir, charting how jazz went from being constricted to incidental source music in '40s noir to being utilized in the privileged nondiegetic scores for the films of the later period. Butler further discusses how jazz-inflected and fully-fledged jazz soundtracks may heighten and reflect narrative developments and character motives in '50s noir.

## 1.5 Jazz: A Social History

Jazz is a musical genre that originated in the African-American communities in New Orleans in the early 20th century. It is known for its eccentric rhythms, call and response vocals, and spontaneous improvisation. While it has been common to associate its harmony with Europe and its rhythms with Africa, jazz is viewed by many as America's classical music. One of the early, influential idioms of jazz was known as the New Orleans style, alternatively referred to as Dixieland or traditional 'hot' jazz. Dixieland surfaced in and around the brothels and bars of Basin Street's red-light district and became quickly associated with drugs, crime, and illicit sexuality. In the early jazz age, these associations, in conjunction with the fact that the music was invented by a 'substandard' race, lead to the creation of primitivist myths and stereotypes about jazz. For white demographics completely new to the music, jazz was an innately primitive musical form that was practiced by what was conceived as an animalistic race. As Ted Gioia writes, this eurocentric stereotype "views jazz a music charged with emotion" and "sees the jazz musician as the inarticulate and unsophisticated practitioner" (1989: 137-8). Charles Gallagher and Cameron Lippard, similarly, assert that "the primitivist perception of jazz reduced artistic creation into a spontaneous, instinctive, animalistic activity, devoid of cerebral, intellectual intent" (2014: 628). There was also the "natural rhythm myth," that jazz musicians were exotic creatures with the biological ability to feel and play their music; that no training, discipline or skill was required. This was, as Paul McCann writes, "the myth of the musical savage who possessed an innate technical brilliance that transcended formal instruction" (2008: 17). Indeed, representations of jazz in classical Hollywood cinema play on these myths and stereotypes. As I argue in this work, the decadent associations and primitivist myths linked to jazz were appropriated into the asphalt jungles and criminal underworlds that white filmmakers created with film noir. Despite such generalizing sentiments, however, white culture simultaneously developed a subversive fascination with the music. This fascination rose to prominence during the swing era. Swing took black music out of New Orleans and into northern urban metropolises such as New York and Los Angeles. Dominant in the '30s and '40s, swing comprised big bands that played upbeat, danceable, and popular standards for casual audiences. As John Gennari writes, swing "challenged the boundaries between performers and audiences, intellectuals (or patricians) and the 'masses,' and blacks and whites," embodying "a welcome symbol of social integration" that "cut across lines of



race” (2006: 96). David Stowe, similarly, credits swing for “dissolving the barriers between performer and audience, by making the ‘spectators’ cocreators of culturing meaning through their dancing, cheers, and partisanship” (1998: 22). But the cultural meaning produced such interaction certainly had its backlashes. Though swing was celebrated by whites, black intellectuals wrote it off as light entertainment and a commercialized industry for the masses. The swing era was also the era of entertainers, that is, musicians who went to extreme lengths to musically and socially satisfy their audiences. Rather than following their artistic visions, entertainers played popular songs for the purpose of crowd pleasing and commercialization. They deliberately clowned themselves before white audiences to remind whites of their racial and social privileges. Through self-stereotyping, jazz musicians offered a welcomed form of otherness that elevated whiteness. In return, the entertainers attracted larger audiences and gained larger economic profits. Some jazzmen considered the mask of stereotype the only way to financially survive in the racially stratified America. Equally so, stereotyping was the only method to land bit parts in Hollywood films. Modern jazz artists, however, considering swing and entertaining acts of selling out, both musically and culturally (which might be why we don’t see many modern musicians in film noir). Louis Armstrong was particularly scrutinized for this. His whiter-than-white teeth, wide grins, dancing, and pupil-popping were all stamped as characteristics of minstrelsy and degrading strategies to increase his popularity among white establishments. Armstrong was accused of willingly reinforcing the Uncle Tom and Coon stereotypes. The trumpeter himself rose against these criticisms, proclaiming his stage persona as unforced and a natural expression of his true character. Similarly, entertaining wasn’t necessarily self-humiliating, but a legitimate way to financially exploit and hustle unaware white audiences. In this sense, some entertainers made a living off letting white patrons underestimate them. As Gennari remarks: “Armstrong’s mugging and Gillespie’s jiving were not instances of Tomming, but of an artfully subversive mimicry that ingeniously critiqued the racist attitudes of their culture industry sponsors” (2006: 320). Moreover, this analogy is perhaps equally applicable to stereotyped jazz musicians and other black stock characters in classical Hollywood cinema. Howard Becker, similarly, believes it is wrong to divide jazz musicians into sub-groups (such as commercial and artistic), but rather think of individual performances “as ways of playing, ways of doing the job” (in Faulkner 2009: 173). With the rise of the modern jazz movement in the early ‘50s, however, a group of young rebellious musicians began to nourish their own artistry over the sort of forced audience interaction that characterized

their predecessors. Bebop thrived in the immediate postwar years, an explorative and artistically inclined incarnation of jazz that was defined by fast tempos, improvisation, and rapid chord progressions. Bop represented something completely different from the racialized entertainment and commercialism that demarcated the swing era. Innovated and popularized by exclusively black musicians, bebop was, as Scott DeVeaux writes, “tied to a conscious expression of a separatist sentiment” and “rooted deeply in the uncomfortable realities of race in America” (1997: 169). It was, as Thelonious Monk once confessed, “a music that *they* couldn’t play” (in Hodgkinson 2016). With ‘they,’ Monk referred to white bandleaders who, due to better opportunities in the racist music industry, had capitalized on black music for multiple decades already. Bebop introduced the aesthetic of the coolly detached musician, indifferent to the presence and demands of his nightclub audience. DeVeaux furthers: “In place of the often tawdry transactions between artist and audience summoned by the words *entertainment* and *showmanship*, bebop offered the spectacle of musicians playing for their own enjoyment” (1997: 202). Though the swing era heavily declined in the late ‘40s, and bop became increasingly popular, Hollywood failed to keep up with the times. With its strive towards realism, this is particularly ironic in the case of film noir. As David Butler notes, bebop is virtually nonexistent in the original noir canon, only “associated with film noir because they share the same historical context” (2002: 21). Hollywood hesitated towards representing an idiom of jazz that carried such a distinctive black sensibility. Bop certainly encompassed more black integrity and intellectualism than the film industry was ready to accept. The style elevated the black musician from entertainer to artist, a shift that the movie business in the ‘40s was far from ready to embrace. There are, however, slight expressions of bebop in classical film noir, either in nightclub sequences or in the screenplay versions of these sequences. But as I show, these signifiers of bop conform to the dominant myths and stereotypes of the early jazz age, that black music is intrinsically primitive, animalistic, and degenerate. Despite falling out of the mainstream when film noir peaked, swing remained the dominant form of African-American source music in the cycle. This is not to say that swing had become completely unpopular, but only that film noir could have expanded its musical representations. Synchronous with bop emerged cool jazz which, with its relaxed tempos and lighter tones, is considered a counterpoint to bop. Cool jazz did nevertheless serve the same social function in terms of artistic aspiration and audience separatism. In the words of Joel Dinerstein, “cool is the sign of *rebellion through withdrawal*” (in Haselstein 2013: 110). The cool attitude in jazz diverged from the constant

availability usually expected from black musicians. For Dinerstein, cool was “the sign of a larger semiotic system of rebellion” (ibid: 117). Rebellion lies in the semiotic movements of physiognomy and body language, or even the lack of movements within these modes. The cool cats developed subversive strategies of doing by not doing, reacting by not reacting, telling by not telling. As Leroi Jones writes, “to be cool was, in its most accessible meaning, to be calm, even unimpressed, by what horrors the world might daily propose” (ibid: 82). The cool postures as embodied by modern jazz musicians revolted against social structures with a peculiarly charged indifference. Unlike the racialized interactions that characterized swing music, bop and cool eradicated racial boundaries and encouraged nightclub attendance simply for the love of the music. The elevation from commercial entertainer to professional artist is a shift that can be traced in the films as well, with ‘50s noir generally offering more progressive representations of jazz.

## 1.6 The Hip, The Cool, & The Beat Generation

The classical phase of film noir coincided with the rise of The Beat Generation. Jack Kerouac introduced the term ‘beat’ in 1948, referring to the free-spirited and nonconforming white youths of the immediate postwar era. ‘Beat’ was borrowed from the slang of black jazz musicians, originally meaning poor, tired, or exhausted. Kerouac modified its initial meaning, transforming the word to an attitude, a way of life, a specific mode of looking at the world. For Kerouac, beat culture comprised individuals who viewed themselves as social outsiders and represented a rejection of dominant ideology. Resenting capitalism and materialism, the beat movement embraced sexual liberation, drug exploration, and spontaneous creativity. In 1958, a whole 10 years after having redefined the black slang term, Kerouac merged it with a more recognizable concept: “it’s a hipness. It’s twentieth century hipness” (in Hayes 2005: 3). In trying to understand ‘beat,’ ‘hip’ certainly comes to mind. Norman Mailer, too, saw past the initial term: “Not too many people seem to use the word Beats; it is uncomfortable on the tongue; those who refuse to let it die seem to use it as an omnibus for hipsters.” Beats, or hipsters, then, further developed a hefty fascination for African-American culture, and more specifically jazz music. This curiosity was much in line with their pursuit of an otherwise alternative lifestyle.. The credibility of their attraction to jazz, however, is consistently questioned and scrutinized. Black musicians have argued that white hipsters frequented jazzclubs not for their alleged genuine passion for the music

but for the completion of their public image. Because it was 'hip' to be seen in and associated with such places. John Leland defines hip the following way:

Hip is a social relation ... it requires an audience. Even at its most subterranean, it exists in public view, its parameters defined by the people watching it ... Hip requires a transaction, an acknowledgement (2005: 8).

Having spent endless of hours on nightclub stages, with a clear and constant view of their audiences, jazz artists sometimes managed to identify superficial white patrons. Musicians often grew frustrated with those visitors that 'performed' their hipness at the expense of reverencing the music. Musicians often grew frustrated with those visitors that 'performed' their hipness at the expense of reverencing the music. There are thus multiple stories told by musicians who look beyond the public facade of hipness. The following accounts provide telling insights into the racial climate on the American jazz scene in the postwar years:

They don't listen. They are there because it's supposed to be hip to be there. They go to be seen - but not to see what you have to offer

People just disrespect you in clubs, the owners and the hip set. There are certain places downtown where everybody goes because everybody's got to be hip and it's the place to hang out (in Wilmer 1992: 21).

You are here because jazz has publicity, jazz is popular ... and you like to associate yourself with this sort of thing. But it doesn't make you a connoisseur of the art because you follow it around ... You sit there in front of me and talk about your crude love affairs (in Monson 1995: 415).

Musicians are human beings and sometimes, I think people tend to be a little unfair and not recognize them as such. They treat them as a jukebox - put your money in, turn on, and turn it off (in Wilmer 1992: 14).

These telling observations disclose black musicians' infuriation with white beat/hip culture and translate to my own analysis of the diegetic artist/audience dialectic in film noir. In classical Hollywood cinema, and particularly in the noir cycle, there are extents to which the films represent white protagonists that "go to be seen," "got to be hip," "talk about crude love affairs," and treat musicians "as a jukebox." Similarly, the jazzclubs in film noir do not exist in a vacuum; they

belong to a context and period in time when jazz, for complex reasons, was becoming increasingly popular in the popular imagination. This is not to say, however, that white jazz fans with a genuine fascination for jazz as musical artistry was nonexistent, but only that there is enough evidence for hip superficiality to locate a preliminary pattern. Hipsterism, then, as Leland suggests, lets public appearance and how you are measured in the public view take precedence over your internal beliefs. Hip has more to do with longing to be observed a certain way than with who you really are. This is what separates ‘hip’ from ‘cool,’ two terms often used interchangeably. Cool, by contrast, works the other way around. Cool persons are so deeply withdrawn into their own mindsets that they don’t care what the public thinks of them. As Joel Dinerstein writes: “The cool person does not explain the content of his or her rebellion. This is a salient difference between being hip and being *cool*” (2017: 231). While the hipster channels an ongoing need to explain his alleged identity, or if you like, show off this identity, the cool person is so focused on himself and how to survive in the world that he simply doesn’t have time for other people’s judgement of him. Dinerstein continues: “cool is the sign of *rebellion through withdrawal*” (in Haselstein 2013: 110). Postwar cool rebels against dominant ideology with a peculiarly and politically charged detachment; a subversive way of responding by not responding. For modern jazz musicians, cool was an aesthetic posture of indifference that rebelled against the flamboyant showmanship of stereotyped entertainers such as Louis Armstrong. No longer would jazz artists degrade themselves with grinning and dancing before a white audience. While white nightclub patrons were generally considered hip, black jazz musicians, being the modern ones that arose in the ‘50s, were considered cool. One way to put it is that white hipsters were hip *to* the cool aesthetic of jazz artists, without knowing the depths and downs of where this cool came from. For the cool attitude as radiated by musicians such as Lester Young and Miles Davis was deeply rooted in the strenuous racial injustices faced by African-Americans for centuries. Cool was synonymous with being isolated and left out from dominant society, yet not showing any vulnerability in relation to this exclusion. Whether cool white persons ever existed, at least as far as the black meaning of the term is concerned, is debatable. Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum, the two undisputed front figures of classical film noir, are often considered cool in the popular imagination. Both of these actors represented a particular obliviousness to and isolation from the world and possessed rebellious features that stood in stark contrast to the finer Hollywood establishment. They were rootless, independent figures. But what about noir antiheroes? Are they hip or cool? In my research on film

noir, I have seen them been described as both, depending on the scholar writing. Surely, noir protagonists are often introverted outcasts with a detached and unimpressed outlook on postwar life that lends from the cool of their contemporaneous black jazz musicians. In fact, James Naremore suggests that noir antiheroes' frequency in black clubs and admiration for jazz give them "an aura of 'cool'" (1998: 240). But this might be just an aura that the films project onto them. While genuine cool persons don't explain the content of their character, these films certainly and somewhat gratuitously aim to teach us about the liberalism of their protagonists. The insistence of these nightclub sequences on showcasing white racial transgression inevitably leans towards the public display of hipness. As Leland reminds us, hip requires an audience. Alternatively, the noir canon disguises its hipness behind believably cool white figures. The films are hip. The protagonists are cool. Either way, jazz is rarely granted the time, richness, and point of view it deserves particularly for its inclusion in a film category that often attempts to take the music seriously. While often portraying jazz musicians sympathetically, the cycle concurrently appropriates black culture in its appraisal of allegedly liberal white identities. Noir jazz, then, sometimes reflect the real racial backlashes of The Beat Generation.

Perhaps the most influential literary work to emerge out of this generation of nonconformism is Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road" (1957). Kerouac's book offers a fascinating yet fictional account of postwar beat culture and, in particular, of the vigorous liberation that white hipsters received in and around the jazzclubs across America's major cities. Kerouac writes with the best of intentions and with clear approbation for jazz, but he fails to evade the problems inherent in perspective and of the dominant racialized society of which he himself was an inhabitant. That is, the beat writer's affection for black music, told through the voices of his two main characters Sal and Dean, is inexorably informed by preexisting sexualized and primitivist jazz myths. Kerouac neglects the comprehensive musicality of jazz and its various substyles, but merely employs the music as a metaphor and generator of madness, freneticism, and primitivism. It seems that the sound of jazz and presence of black musicians are prerequisite components necessary for Sal and Dean to come into contact with their 'primitive' side. The story is simple: two young men travel across the American continent in search of external kicks and internal redemption. It is specifically in two cities, San Francisco and Chicago respectively, that the extricating effect jazz has on them is most palpable. Kerouac's novel provides many eurocentric outlooks on black musicians that are told from the white point of view of the main characters and that perturbingly adhere to dominant

jazz mythologies. I will catalogue a few of these outlooks here. In Frisco, a drummer is described as “a big brutal Negro with a bullneck who didn’t give a damn about anything but punishing his busted tubs ... kicking his drums down the cellar and rolling the beat upstairs with his murderous sticks” (197). An alto saxophonist, similarly, supposedly possesses the innate ability to express “the pit and prunejuice of poor beat life itself in the god-awful streets of man” (199). A bass player is purportedly “jabbing his hips at the fiddle with every driving slap, at hot moments his mouth hanging open trancelike” (241). Another drummer is delineated to be “completely goofed, staring into space, wide-eyed, rocking the neck with Reich kick and complacent ecstasy” (242). The following passage, however, might be most telling in terms of Kerouac’s generalizations about black culture. Here the typical jazz player is designated as someone who

slept all day and blew all night, and blew a hundred choruses before he was ready to jump for fair ... he had beady, glittering eyes; small, crooked feet; spindly legs; and he hopped and flopped with his horn and threw his feet around and kept his eyes fixed on the audience ... he was very simple in his ideas (201).

There are plenty more primitivist accounts of jazz located in Kerouac’s novel and they are all consistent with how white culture has historically perceived African American music. These descriptions reveal the extent to which Kerouac, though a leftist liberal, was so much an ineluctable product of a blatantly racialized period in time. His imageries of audience reactions, too, are no less savagely articulated, with Dean in particular often shouting phrases such as “go, go, go,” “blow, man, blow!” and “let’s go, let’s not stop, go now” in response to the music of black musicians (197-201). Jazz further serves to trigger Dean’s irrepressible sexual appetite for ladies: “Oh, I love, love, love women! I Think women are wonderful! I love women!” (140-1). Kerouac’s stereotypical descriptions of jazz in “On the Road,” and indeed Dean’s wild reactions to the music, is immensely translatable to the artist/audience dialectic in the jazz sequence in *D.O.A.* (1949), a film noir that is generally credited for providing the first audiovisual interpretation of the postwar beat movement. His disquieting imaginings are neither completely distinguishable from how jazz players are sketched and outlined in many of the noir screenplays that are explored in this study.

Though Kerouac’s “On the Road” is guilty of substantial racial backlash, it doesn’t come close to the racial repercussions evident in Norman Mailer’s controversial essay “The White Negro” (1957), another seminal literary work to arise out of the beat generation. Writing from a leftist,

liberal perspective, much like Kerouac, Mailer connects white postwar disenchantment to oppressed African-American culture. Due to their marginalization for numerous centuries, Mailer views African-Americans as suitable models for white hipsters. For Mailer, blacks were accustomed to the position of social outsider and possessed a day-by-day survival mentality that appealed to the white hipster rebelling against dominant society. In particular, white nonconformists were mesmerized by jazz musicians and the improvisational, carefree, and inestimable nature of their music. Mailer argues that the white postwar generation who

had absorbed the lessons of disillusionment of the Twenties, the Depression, and the War ... was attracted to what the Negro had to offer ... The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro (in Sipiora 2014: 44-6).

Clearly the leftist writer seeks to establish some integrative common ground between racial counterparts existing together in a polarizing world. But Mailer wanders down the edgy path of comparing, and even equaling, more immediate white hindrances to the enduring, tyrannous struggles of African-Americans. The “lessons of disillusionment” that Mailer mentions were even obstacles that black Americans, in addition to their more substantial racial ones, similarly experienced. As noted, hipsters did not necessarily pursue interest in black culture for motives of esteem and admiration, but because it had something to offer them. Rather than acknowledging the heterogeneities inherent in black culture, Mailer appropriates it into his celebration of liberal hip whiteness. The leftist writer draws some worrying generalizations about jazz and black masculinity, narrowly deciding for himself the scope of their contents. The following passage, for example, reveals much more about the repressed fantasies of white men than about the diversity in African-American culture:

The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In such a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood, the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could ... he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm (ibid: 45-6).



It appears Mailer thinks he knows more about what it means to be black in postwar America than blacks do themselves. And what he ‘knows’ indubitably reinforces well-worn mythologies; that blacks are uncivilized and that jazz merely stimulates sexual desire. His essay, then, tells us much more about the writer than its subject matter. His genuine intentions are thwarted by the racialized structures in the society of which he so tellingly lived. Kerouac’s “On the Road,” too, correspondingly yet more subtly divulges the sexualized and primitivist perception that white postwar intellectuals oriented towards African-American music. The ideological recoil damages of Kerouac’s and Mailer’s beat literary works are analogous to the backlashes explored in my analysis of representations of jazz in film noir. These flicks of darkness, indeed made by these two beat writers’ liberal contemporaries, attempt to depict racial others decently yet fall for the trappings, myths, and stereotypes intrinsic in classical filmmaking practices and dominant society at large. Mailer’s perception of jazz, much line with Kerouac’s, reminds in fact of the racialized descriptions of jazz in film noir screenplays. Film historian James Naremore registers certain noir antiheroes as embodiments of Mailer’s concept. Naremore considers Mike Hammer, the protagonist, in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), as the “especially apparent” resemblance of the “White Negro” due to his consistent affiliation with African-American culture. For Naremore, Hammer’s mixed-race encounters elevate him to “a relatively sympathetic embodiment of urban liberalism” (1998: 241). Hammer possibly carries, at least from what he emits in certain scenes, the prerequisite qualities necessary to be labeled a personification of Mailer’s concept. But it is problematic to relocate “White Negro” merely to demonstrate the ‘positive’ interracial portrayals in the noir canon. Naremore omits, presumably for scope constrictions, a critical reflection of the polarization inherent in the concept and of the social standpoint from which the essay is written. Linking noir antiheroes with “White Negro” is not necessarily a ‘positive’ unification. In fact, given the narrow, ignorant assumptions that unconsciously shine through Mailer and his essay, there is limited credibility to his concept. Rather than connecting noir characters to the term, it is more fruitful to compare Mailer’s and Kerouac’s eurocentric perspectives to those of the so-called liberal instigators of film noir. While these pictures were often made by liberal filmmakers with affirmative intentions in mind, their modes of address are often debauched by the oppressive attitudes and systems of their time similar to how Mailer’s “The White Negro” is.

## 1.7 Methodology

My methodology for this project primarily involves quantitative film viewing, qualitative film analysis, and archival research. I have watched countless of film noirs trying to catalogue the pictures that feature jazz and black musicians on screen. I must admit that I didn't find as many jazzclub sequences in noir as I expected to on beforehand, assuming there was more of a mutual inclusiveness between the two styles. But there still is something of a presence of jazz in film noir, and as this project shows, this presence is more extensive than other studies have previously recognized. Efforts have gone into constricting my project to a selective set of films which, to best degree possible, evenly spans throughout the whole classical noir era. By extending my analysis, or if you like, limiting my analysis, to '40s and '50s film noir, I hope to distinguish conflicting representations and chart an evolution of changing perceptions towards jazz in the noir cycle. My analysis is very specific and detailed, that is, I go deeply into the mise-en-scene of nightclub sequences and hope to establish a comparative breakdown for both the similar and contrastive ways that jazz is depicted in film noir. My methodology going into this project has also involved archival research. I have visited the UCLA Special Collections, the Margaret Herrick Library, the USC Warner Bros archives, and the BFI Special Collections to explore how jazzclub sequences were drafted at the scriptwriting phase of the production processes. I have investigated whether these descriptions adhere to dominant myths about jazz and the extents to which they are carried out in their screened equivalents. African-American film historian Donald Bogle notes that in 1940s Hollywood filmmaking, "musical numbers were not integrated into the script" and "could be cut from the films without spoiling them should local (our Southern) theater owners feel their audiences would object to seeing a Negro" (2001: 121). Bogle suggests that black musical interludes were "casually inserted" into the films and completely isolated from the developments of themes and storylines, added mostly for comic effect (ibid: 119). But as my archival research proves, this is not so much true for film noir. Nightclub sequences featuring black performers are carefully preplanned in all of the screenplays that I looked at. Had it not been for the scriptwriters, there would probably not have been inclusions of jazz in film noir. Black musicians, and especially the blues singers, tend to even influence the narratives of certain films. If Bogle's observation is correct for other film genres, my research reveals that film noir stands apart from the general

Hollywood establishment on this matter. In noir screenplays, jazz musicians are often described with such racial labels as ‘colored’ or ‘negro.’ When they are not defined with these discriminative markers, their music is described with the primitivist language to suggest that the musical interludes were written for black performers. Jazzclub sequences are often visually executed in accordance to how they were outlined in the scripts. In some cases, however, the films offer different scenarios from what the scriptwriters originally intended. Sometimes the prevalence of jazz is significantly altered in the films based on the scene descriptions. In other instances, it seems that the scripts provided progressive outlooks on jazz and interracial relations, outlooks that were too radical to survive the PCA and the final films. I was unable to locate and access the screenplays for all the films that I examine in this study. I did nonetheless manage to view most of the scripts, providing a useful foundation for the various perceptions that white noir screenwriters oriented towards jazz and black artistry in the immediate postwar years. By looking into these scripts, I am able to unveil the ways in which dominant racial ideology went into the making of many film noirs.

## 1.8 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis is by and large interdisciplinary. Rather than merely operating within the film studies paradigm, this study draws from a wider range of academic perspectives. In addition to film studies, it is partly informed by marxist theory, semiotics, post-colonialism, and jazz studies. Many of the questions I pose cannot be answered only by looking at the film texts in isolation. Film noir does not exist in a vacuum, and in order to comprehend how racial ideology operates throughout the canon one needs to understand its larger cultural and socio-political contexts. In this section I identify and discuss the theoretical backgrounds that mold and inform my study on representations of jazz in film noir. Certain theories are employed directly in my film analysis, while others serve as underlying backdrops that are worth having loosely in mind when construing the films.

My film analysis is chiefly a semiotic analysis. In particular, I draw from the work of Christian Metz and his semiotic film theory. Writing in the 1970s, Metz reasoned the existence of a cinematic language system where underlying codes shape the structure and meaning of a film. It is not the individual code that provides meaning, but the relations between the various codes. Metz

distinguishes between cinematic and extra-cinematic codes. The former comprise the components of the cinematic apparatus itself, such as camera positioning, lighting, transitioning, sequencing etc. The latter codes, conversely, are not inherent in the apparatus but stem from the outside social world. These include, dialogue, behavior, gestures, physiognomy, clothing etc. As Metz writes, the extra-cinematic code “is a social code of everyday behavior ... as extensive and varied as social life itself (1974: 116, 150). According to Metz, the amalgamation of these two code groups give films their meaning. This amalgamation creates specific racial meanings in classical cinema and Metz’ seminal study offers a useful perspective from which to divulge racial ideology in classical film noir. For example, the ways that minority characters are lit, positioned and sequenced, in conjunction with their often stereotyped mannerisms, serve to exoticize blackness and normalize whiteness as the privileged point-of-view. Metz’ exploration of film semiotics coincides, both perspectivally and historically, with Jean-Louis Baudry’s influential 1974 essay on dominant ideology and the ideological nature of the cinematic apparatus. Despite not addressing issues of race, Baudry contends that the technologies of cinematic reproduction, such as recording, editing, and lighting, are ideologically inclined. He argues that the mechanics of filmmaking are instilled to produce “a precise ideological effect, necessary to dominant ideology” (1974: 46). The spectator, whom he calls a passive viewer, is subconsciously shaped by the natural ideological positioning of the cinema. Baudry furthers the spectator identifies less with the object seen onscreen than with the mechanics that construct this object: “the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees” (ibid: 45). Applying Baudry to my own study, film noir aims to make us identify with the perspective from which jazz is looked at, namely the white eurocentric perspective. The practice of movie lighting is another worrying example where dominant ideology is naturally embedded into its mechanics. Since visual reproduction was originally created for and by white people, the issue of filming and lighting people of color was not considered. This has resulted in the inability to capture and indifference to how darker skin complexions are captured on screen. In classical Hollywood cinema, blacks are rarely reproduced accurately. It seems that black characters are either duplicated on screen as very dark or very light, sometimes depending on the narrative contexts of their performances. In film noir, ostensibly shadowed black players link them to the visual style that is associated with the immorality and deception of the canon. Which is why, as Patrick Keating writes, “it is important to look at noir lighting in context – in the

context of the films as a whole, in the context of the history of lighting, and in the context of the culture at large” (2009: 246). Of course, casual viewers tend not to think of the ideological underpinnings that Baudry speaks of while watching movies. The apparatus makes the spectator forget the apparatus, and it is only when deconstructing its components and uncovering its ideological effects that one achieves the desired “knowledge effect” (Baudry 1974: 40). When attaining the knowledge effect, the ideological effect ceases to exist. It is this knowledge effect which I aim to achieve with this study, breaking down how dominant racial discourse can be produced through the natural mechanics and conventions of the cinematic apparatus. The general yet groundbreaking studies undertaken by Marxist film theorists such as Metz and Baudry have opened up for more specific examinations of how race and gaze operates in Hollywood cinema. I am here inspired by, among others, the works of bell hooks (1992), Richard Dyer (1997), and Ann Kaplan (1997). These writers explore the dynamics and implications of looking relations between white males and racial/ethnic others. As Dyer argues, the point of view shot “is far more often that of a white male character scrutinising, appraising and savouring black and/or female characters than vice versa. Looking and being looked at reproduce racial power relations” (1997: 45). Hooks contends that even if a white character is appraising a black character, for example a jazz musician, the exchange is not stripped of racial implications. She concurs:

While it has become ‘cool’ for white folks to hang out with black people and express pleasure in black culture, most white people do not feel that this pleasure should be linked to unlearning racism. Indeed there is often the desire to enhance one’s status in the context of ‘whiteness’ even as one appropriates black culture (1992: 17).

Indeed, this an issue that lies at the core of the impact of my study. As a white man entering an ethnic space, he brings along certain involuntary privileges that are attached to his racial and gendered identity which must be taken into account. As Kaplan writes, “looking relations are never innocent. They are always determined by the cultural systems people travelling bring with them” (1997: 6). These studies serve as a great backdrop for the seemingly liberal and ‘unproblematic’ encounters that take place between white protagonists and black jazz artists in film noir. Gaze theory is tightly connected to post-colonialism, which is why it is difficult to exclude post-colonial theory here. I am particularly interested in Gayatri Spivak’s “worlding” concept. Worlding refers to the overwriting of colonial space by the white explorer simply through his being and seeing.

The western colonizer shapes, or ‘worlds,’ racially and ethnically foreign land through his privileged identity and actions. As Spivak writes: “When colonizers come a world, they encounter it as unscripted earth upon which they write their inscriptions” (1990: 129). A similar process is at stake in Hollywood narratives when white male protagonists, which is the point of view from which we follow the films, travel to Harlem to visit African-American jazzclubs. Until the white leading character enters the black club, it is, within the world of the film, unseen and unscripted terrain. When he enters, the club becomes ‘worlded’ from the privileged perspective of the white male protagonist. Nathan Huggins has previously applied the tropes of western imperialism to the tendency of white visitation to Harlem nightclubs. Referring to the caucasian New Yorker in Harlem as “the white hunter in New York’s heart of darkness,” Huggins articulates white logic with imaginative ironic distance:

How convenient! It was merely a taxi trip to the exotic for most white New Yorkers. In cabarets decorated with tropical and jungle motifs – some of them replicas of southern plantations - they heard jazz, that almost forbidden music ... It was a cheap trip! No safari! Daylight and a taxi ride rediscovered New York City, no tropic jungle. There had been thrill without danger (2007: 89-90).

Huggins’ humorous yet post-colonial description of white hipsters’ visitations to Harlem is, as I show in this study, evocative of the serious ways in which white filmmakers describe and visualize jazzclubs and black musicians in film noir. My analysis clarifies the sense to which representations of jazz, both in screenplays and in the films themselves, draw on the exotic and primitive tropes that Huggins sarcastically utilizes in his interpretation and thereby become worlded from advantaged white perspectives. The main difference, of course, is that Huggins uses these primitive tropes subversively and with historical awareness while noir filmmakers’ usages of them are ignorant and based on time-bound racialized assumptions. During the times of colonialism and slavery, the act of interracial looking was a one-way street: minorities were not permitted to return the gaze that their white colonizers/masters laid upon them. In early jazz history, conversely, there is a sense to which white audiences ‘wanted’ black musicians to look at them, establishing the sensation that entertainers and their showmanship were designed to exclusively please white nightclub patrons. Which is why, in evaluating the screened encounters that take place between white protagonists and jazz musicians in film noir, it is useful to draw from jazz studies and its concepts. The works of Paul Berliner (1994), Ingrid Monson (1996) and, more recently, Bjorn

Heile, Peter Elsdon and Jenny Doctor (2016) have inspired the analytical content of this thesis. These studies are first and foremost interested in the sight and sociability of jazz, contending that jazz is not just something that is listened to but also something that is watched and a form of social interaction. The sight and visuals of jazz, and the relationship between musician and audience in a live performance, captures certain gestural and social nuances that the mere sonic register doesn't. As Berliner writes, "Every music performance is a dramatic presentation for listeners and improvisers alike. In a sense, both groups play interactive roles as actors from their respective platforms" (1994: 459). Berliner goes on to categorize jazz audiences in terms of musical competence and sophistication. Berliner describes certain listeners as people "who lack a serious interest in jazz but nevertheless appreciate it in nightclub settings" (ibid: 456). These are audiences who are "typically most intrusive" because "their own performance consists of drinking and socializing, with jazz providing incidental accompaniment" (ibid: 464). Indeed, this is the type of jazzclub clientele that we often find in classical film noir. Monson, similarly, notes how "musicians are constantly being evaluated both by one another and by audience members" (1996: 95). Heile, Elsdon and Doctor examine how visual recording gives additional social and musical meanings to jazz performance, meanings that wouldn't be present if one was only listening to jazz. For example, the idea of not looking into the camera, nor looking at the audience, is associated with high end artistry: "The avoidance of direct eye contact with the camera serves to present the musician as a serious artist absorbed in the performance" (2016: 176). In classical cinema, conversely, jazz musicians tend to look directly into the camera which in turn serves to primitivize and degrade the musicians. I also engage actively with the individual social and musical backgrounds for the jazz players who surfaces on screen in film noir, offering another lens from which to understand their presences in the pictures. Insights into the historical developments of jazz and the external careers and principles of the musicians appearing onscreen are invaluable in terms of contextualizing and properly understanding the ways in which jazz is represented in the noir cycle. Similarly, I am also interested in how the visual style of a particular filmmaker, and how his social beliefs and values, may impact his audiovisual representation of jazz. In this fashion, I occasionally utilize auteur theory to unveil why and how jazz is depicted certain ways and explore the implications of these depictions.

It is not the intention of this work to manifest any definitive conclusions about the functions of jazz and race in film noir. Equally so, it is not my purpose to simply observe every black musician

who appears on screen in film noir and deduct whether he/she is depicted positively or negatively. Lola Young, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam warn against this type of essentialist positive/negative image approach when it comes to representations of racial minorities and other oppressed groups. As Shohat and Stam assert, one should be wary concluding a particular representation as positive because it is important to consider “for whom?” the representation might be so (1994: 203). They further: “The ‘positive image’ approach assumes a bourgeois morality intimately linked to status quo politics” (ibid). What a white filmmaker might consider a positive representation might be conceived as a negative one by the minority group that is represented. This is especially apparent in film noir since many of its pictures were made by liberal and radical filmmakers who often attempted to shed ‘positive’ light on African-American characters. But as I show, their noble approaches to depicting racial outsiders are frequently backlashed by the ideological machinery of the cinematic apparatus and the racially stratified society of which they were products. Therefore, representations can never be fully ‘positive’ or fully ‘negative,’ in turn making it difficult to properly manifest the ideological nature of film noir. Lola Young, similarly, asserts that analyses “based solely on the text [film] have often been inadequate: critical accounts of the functioning of film representations should consider the social and historical context within which the textual practice is located” (1996: 37). Along these lines, it is necessary to engage with the relevant theory and understand film noir in terms of its proper historical, social, and musical contexts. It is only then one can get a somewhat decent understanding of how the intersection of race, jazz and ideology functions in the cycle.





## Chapter 2

# The Horns Blowing in the Clubs: Jazz & Band Music in '40s Noir

This chapter charts and discusses the male jazz groups and musicians that made their way into the nightclubs and basement joints of the films from the first decade of film noir. My general premise is that '40s noir relocates preexisting myths about jazz (that it is primitive, animalistic and inarticulate), making the music signify the violent, the sexual, and the decadent themes that are illustrative of the noir canon. In looking at pictures such as *When Strangers Marry* (1944), *Kiss of Death* (1947), and *D.O.A.* (1949), I argue that film noir conforms to dominant jazz myths and uneasily implicate the music in criminal and sexual degeneracy. I also examine the Harlem jazzclub sequence in *Out of the Past* (1947), a sequence that, in addition to provide a racial aesthetic for the dark misfortune that awaits the white male protagonist, indicates his hipness and thereby celebrates his alleged liberal whiteness. But the functions of jazz isn't as monolithic as these films might suggest. In *Force of Evil* (1949), for example, jazz is used to cool down rather than hype up its audience and explicitly refuses to associate itself with the depravity of the white male antihero. I further incorporate the screenplays for the films into my analysis, laying bare the often derogatory ways that jazz is described at script level and comparing the scene descriptions to the filmed products. It is often the scenario that the filmed sequences offer different outcomes from what were originally outlined in the scripts. Whether the films provide more progressive representations of jazz than the screenplays, or whether it is vice versa, however, invariably depend on the individual case study. As you go along, it becomes strikingly clear how absent bebop is from the soundscape of noir nightclubs, even though bop achieved status as the most popular and hip idiom of jazz in late '40s popular culture. Although the swing era was on decline in the real world, swing music remains the prevailing idiom of jazz within the noir diegesis. I first look at *Blues in the Night* (1941), a musical noir that not only initiates the relative prevalence of jazz in film noir but also works as a representative text for the ways in which Hollywood has historically treated black musicians on screen.

## 2.1 *Blues in the Night*

Released only a month after *The Maltese Falcon*, Anatole Litvak's *Blues in the Night* (1941) is a musical noir that has been granted merited recognition for its partial initiation of the classical noir canon. This Warner Bros film is replete with the dark shadows, oblique angles, flashback effects, and morally ambiguous characters that came to define much of the original noir cycle. Though it is considered to be one of the defining film noirs, it wasn't recognized as such upon release. It didn't do well at the box office and was reviewed unfavorably, possibly because its darker themes deviated from the escapism and innocent romanticism that demarcated other musicals in golden age cinema. However, the picture has received a following over time and is now viewed as an outright of the noir genre. As Daniel Bubbeo writes, *Blues in the Night* offered a "bleak depiction of life on the road" and "was a mature, well-acted film that stood out from the escapist musicals of the period" (2002: 136). Litvak, who was "fascinated with American music, particularly jazz and its history," presents in this film a group of young men wishing to start their own jazz band (Capua 2015: 59). Granted, the main characters are all white, and the film does the slightest to acknowledge and appreciate the black heritage of jazz. The film nevertheless provides two black musical numbers, both of which are sequenced early in the narrative and encourage the white characters to pursue careers in the jazz profession. The first scene featuring black performers takes place in a St. Louis prison where a group of black inmates, fronted by blues singer William Gillespie, sings Johnny Mercer's and Harold Arlen's "Blues in the Night." Their poignant rendition of the title song and the close-ups given to them offer rare and genuine emphasis on black racial struggle for a wartime Hollywood film. As Robert Rossen, who was an outspoken liberal and later blacklisted communist, initially sketched their blues in his script: "Through the darkness of the jail comes the deep voice of another negro singing a blues - a haunting strain with the inherent loneliness and misery of oppression that only the negro can express" (1941: 14). Although Rossen utilizes the pejorative term "negro" in his screenplay, it is important to note that racial labels were common practice at the time of writing and that he arguably wrote the sequence with sympathy and good intent. The aspiring white musicians, stuck in a jail cell just opposite that of the singing black prisoners, are astounded by their spiritual blues. They gaze at the African-American jailbirds with the fascination and curiosity to suggest that jazz represents a new and uninscribed world that they have never seen before. Though the close-ups of Gillespie and his

fellow inmates briefly emphasize racial oppression (“We’ve got all the miseries in here”), black bit players are here also stridently othered and appropriated from the point of view of leading white characters. Protagonist Jigger (Richard Whorf), whose name is only one consonant away from being a racist slur, excitedly exclaims: “That’s the blues! The real low-down New Orleans blues!” The spiritual vocals of the black prisoners, who indeed “serve a crucial plot function,” inspire Jigger and his boys to form their own band in New Orleans (Decker 2011: 290). Their travel to New Orleans is conveyed through a signature Don Siegel montage that condenses expressive shots of exhausted black cotton laborers which eventually dissolve into a map of the southern American city. As Alan Casty writes, Siegel’s montage is a rare “commentary on racial injustice and prejudice” and offer “glimpses (not often seen in films at this time) of the lives of blacks in the segregated society of the South” (2013: 50). This montage, like the blues of Gillespie and the prisoners, is primarily thanks to the racial sympathies and liberal mind of Robert Rossen who initially drafted these visual segments in his screenplay. Conversely, as this chapter also indicates, scriptwriters who have sketched blatantly racist and stereotyped descriptions of jazz in their scripts must also take partial responsibility for the visualized versions of these descriptions.



1. Jazz in Silhouette: Gerald Wilson, Snooky Young, and Paul Webster in *Blues in the Night* (1941).

In the birthplace of jazz, they are once again enthused by black jazz musicians, this time by Jimmie Lunceford and his Orchestra. Lunceford's big band was one of the most popular swing bands during the '30s, a popularity Warner Bros wanted to capitalize on. The working title for the film was in fact *Hot Nocturne*, but due to the success Lunceford had with the song "Blues in the Night" at the time, they changed the title of the film to that of the song. Lunceford was a commercial entertainer in the traditional sense of the term. According to Eddy Determeyer, Lunceford and his orchestra were known for their onstage antics, dancing, choreographed movements, and carefully rehearsed bows to their crowds (2006: 92). In short, they were prototypical of the all-black swing band that sacrificed some of their artistic integrity in order to cross over to a larger white audience. Their characteristic showmanship is certainly encapsulated in the film. The New Orleans nightclub sequence establishes the charismatic Lunceford orchestra perform for a vibrant and excited white clientele. Rossen's script, similarly, not only draws on the obligatory self-degrading showmanship

of black musicians but also on the unfortunate associations between New Orleans jazz and “low down” degeneracy:

INT. CHEAP RESTAURANT

MED. CLOSE SHOT – A FOUR PIECE COLORED ORCHESTRA

To say that they are really low down is an understatement. They are really New Orleans musicians. Big grins on their faces reflect their happiness and abando (1941: 23).

If Rossen offered a relatively sympathetic description of the black musicians in the St. Louis jail house, the same cannot be said for this one. Rossen here reinforces the negative association between black music and decadence, *précising* the dominant white perception of jazz that demarcated the early jazz age. His description also reveals another white misconception in that grins reflect happiness when, in reality, grinning was the only strategy for many blacks to land nightclub gigs and movie roles. His script goes on to suggest that even if you were a white liberal and communist, which Rossen indisputably was, disparaging views of jazz and blackness could persist in your imagination. Litvak’s film nevertheless depicts Jigger’s hopeful boys as enthralled by the energy of Lunceford’s large combo which, unlike the script originally outlined, includes more than four band members. “What a town this New Orleans is, just listen to those boys,” Peppi (Billy Halop) eagerly outbursts. “Shut up, will you,” Nickie (Elia Kazan) instantly counters, equally excited but desiring to inhale the music without disruptive comments from the audience. The sequence offers close-ups of several of Lunceford’s sidemen, displaying brief solos by Jimmy Crawford (drums), Joe Thomas (saxophone), Trummy Young (trombone), Gerald Wilson (trumpet), and Snooky Young (trumpet). Wilson would actually go on to initiate the Harlem jazzclub sequence in *Out of the Past* (1947), a sequence I discuss later in this chapter. Lunceford himself, however, is not playing his saxophone, but merely waving his baton and conducting his vigorous orchestra. The postures and instruments of Lunceford’s band are, in signature noir style, embellished in silhouettes on white walls surrounding the bandstand. Indeed, Determeyer notes that Lunceford’s big band frequently performed “behind a screen, in backlighting, the shadows on the screen heightening the drama of the tune” (2006: 92). A similar effect is arguably created here, with the enlarged shadows not only foreshadowing the picture’s noir themes but also inadvertently anticipating the pervasiveness of jazz in classical film noir. The solos of Lunceford’s sidemen encourage recognition from Jigger as well, who responds with a “boy, they are wonderful!” Leo

Powell (Jack Carson), a slick white trumpeter auditioning for Jigger's band, isn't that impressed, convinced he is more skillful than the reputable black jazzmen. "They're not so hot," Leo uncaringly boasts, declaring he could "blow 'em all right out of the joint." Jigger is not amused by Leo's offensive bragging, urging the overconfident trumpeter to show what he is good for. Leo's immediate excuse is that he only plays when financially rewarded, insinuating that he, as opposed to the black musicians, is "a professional." Annoyed, Jigger calls him a "phony," which is enough for Leo to pick up his instrument. He stands up and interrupts Lunceford's band with a dazzling hot trumpet solo. His unsolicited musical intrusion is disrespectful in the sense that it casually steals from the already limited attention dispensed to the marginalized black band. Given the racial stereotypes and subjugation that informed Hollywood filmmaking at the time, however, Lunceford had no choice but to smile back and act impressed. Despite initially suggesting that Lunceford's band first "seem resentful" over Leo's musical interference, Rossen cynically instructs that "the colored boys grin, their white teeth showing as Leo's trumpet take the lead" (1941: 24). To be sure, there is limited resentment on Lunceford's part that is carried out in the film; the black musicians are typically grinning and playing along in response to the white trumpeter's solo. The act of grinning was a mask that African-American actors and musicians were instructed by white filmmakers to put on, designed to reflect their obliviousness and subordination to the foregrounded dramatic action. In turn, such grins exposed white teeth that was marked against and thereby highlighted their dark skin complexions. Leo and Lunceford's trumpet section engage in a hornblowing play-off which it is heavily suggested that the white musician wins. Leo is met by applause from the audience as he packs down his instrument and gets ready to leave the nightclub. He earns the full attention of Jigger's boys who have suddenly become completely uninterested in the black swing musicians.



2. The Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra reacting to Leo's invasive musical showoff in *Blues in the Night* (1941).

Peter Townsend notes that Leo's indiscreet solo "draws an immediate sign of approval from the black musicians" and that scenes where "white musicianship is explicitly approved by black players is a recurrent feature of jazz films" (2000: 97). But there is more than illusory approval at stake here. Leo's solo recapitulates the contemporaneous misconception that whites play better jazz than blacks, a misconception that not only tinged Hollywood narratives but also dominant society. The brutal irony here, of course, is that the solos of the white actor were ghosted by Snooky Young, who can be seen next to Gerald Wilson in Lunceford's trumpet section. But wartime spectators couldn't have known that because Young is, like virtually every black artist working in classical Hollywood cinema, uncredited for his dubbing work. The majority of musicians discussed in this study were neither credited for their onscreen appearances or soundtrack contributions. In '40s cinema, black jazz could be casually utilized in small doses but not professionally and thoroughly accredited for the artistry that it was. According to Krin Gabbard,



Leo's mimed solo "draws on the sexuality as well as the music of black men" and follows the "practice of allowing the sound of black musicians but not their images" (1996: 112). *Blues in the Night* is one of many jazz films that briefly acknowledge the black roots of jazz only to disallow black control over the music by appropriating it to chiefly concern the stories of white musicians. Jazz aficionado and longtime Lunceford-fan Frank Bonitto was outraged by Hollywood's treatment of Lunceford's orchestra which, in the real world, was one of the best-dressing bands during the '30s and '40s. They were clearly not permitted to wear their fancy clothes in the film. Bonitto outbursts:

*He's in rags!* He's literally in rags. I'm not kidding, no joke about it, no quotations about it. He was in rags! Sitting up there, waving his baton. I said, what the hell is that, what sort of band? They're just as ragamuffin as he is. I said, what are they doing? Oh, I was so upset. Of all bands they'd do that to ... Here's a band that was known for looking so beautiful and sharp and slick and playing so precisely and beautifully. Of course I ran out (in Determeyer 2006: 187).

The white cast and filmmakers nevertheless eventually got what they deserved, at least by Elia Kazan, who grew to become the most successful of the bunch: "The only thing about the production that impressed me was the musical side. Jimmie Lunceford and his band were the best artists on the lot ... As for the rest of the cast – forgive me, fellows, if you read this – they were all second-raters" (1988: 189).

## 2.2 *When Strangers Marry*

A far more noired appropriation of black performers and black jazz aesthetics can be found in William Castle's *When Strangers Marry* (1944), a film that, for Orson Welles, was "better acted and better directed than" both *Laura* and *Double Indemnity* (in Callow 2006: 233). This Monogram vehicle also remains one of few pictures in the noir cycle, alongside *Out of the Past* (1947) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), to stroll inside an all-black inhabited nightclub. The white couple that stumbles upon this Harlem basement joint, however, is far from oozing the level of conversancy with black culture that Mitchum and Meeker showcase in their respective films. Diegetic jazz here maintains the locus of otherness while also threatening the monopoly of whiteness. Castle's film follows Paul (Dean Jagger) and Millie (Kim Hunter), two newly married fugitives, whose relationship has escalated to a dark and menacing mood by the time of their Harlem visitation. Millie suspects that her husband, whom she is becoming increasingly estranged from, is a

dangerous murderer. Black culture here establishes a racialized source for the darkness and anxiety that haunt the narrative. As Jonathan Auerbach writes, this Harlem nightclub sequence “adds nothing to the plot but heightens the tension,” suggesting that race here works as “a metaphor or instance of a wider kind of disenfranchisement” (2011: 20). African-American dominion does not offer safety and security for the white protagonists, but merely bolsters their social entrapment. Paul and Millie wander unbearably through the streets of Harlem and urgently search for a site of refuge. The newlyweds attempt to enter a pool hall, but its door is blocked by a tall smoking fellow, looking suspiciously at the couple. They keep walking until they discover a basement joint with a neon sign reading Big Jim’s. Its clientele, which is all-black, is dancing and drinking to the “swingin’ piano” of Lorenzo Flennoy, a grinning boogie-woogie pianist (Vacher 2015: 91). A black couple, played by Lennie Bluett and Marie Bryant, is dancing Lindy Hop, a popular style of jazz dance from Harlem. Bluett, whose mother was Humphrey Bogart’s personal cook for thirty years, was a popular dancer at the time and even entertained at many of Bogart’s private parties. Bogart even landed him an audition for the role of Sam in *Casablanca* (1942), but according to the dancer himself, “I was too young, too tall, and too good-looking” to get the part. Bryant was a flashy dancer who danced in Duke Ellington’s orchestra and at Harlem’s Cotton Club and Apollo Theater. She was also, in the words of Ellington, “one of the world’s greatest dancers” (in Smith 1996: 72). Bryant later danced in Nicholas Ray’s *They Live By Night* (1949) and was in fact romantically involved with the director.



3. Harlem Jazz: Lennie Bluett, Marie Bryant, and Lorenzo Flennoy in *When Strangers Marry* (1944).

Bluett and Bryant interact with Flennoy, dancingly looking over his fingerly repertoire, before suddenly and inquisitively lifting their vision up towards the staircase. Paul and Millie proceed down the stairs of Big Jim's to the astonished facial reactions of its black clientele. Indeed, this extraordinary moment contraries the power balance of the interracial looking relations established in the musical interludes in *Blues in the Night*. African-Americans respond with a charged incredulity to the anomaly of white people entering their territory. This also stands in sharp contrast to the Harlem in *Out of the Past* where African-Americans are completely oblivious to Jeff Markham's penetration of their regular nightly hotspot. Perhaps Jeff is just so cool that it's nothing to be bothered about. Unlike the homogenized black masses in Tourneur's and Aldrich's films, however, black bit players are here granted close-ups that enriches them beyond suturing to white hipsterism. By forwarding uneasy gaze, they contribute to the overall themes of alienation and desperation that the film conveys. While this racialized sequence demonizes blackness, connoting

malice to white demographics, its looking relation offers African-Americans the prospect of returning the gaze that white superiors have laid upon them for centuries. This oppositional gaze, if you will, evokes the unusual discomfort white explorers feel when they experience, in the words of Sartre, “the sensation of being seen,” of losing “the privilege of seeing without being seen.” Disturbed by the corrosive gaze and scathing noise, the couple leaves briefly after arriving. As Joe Jordan writes, the sequence demonstrates “that the cultural differences in American society have the potential to divide instead of unite” (2014: 78). But the sequence otherwise comes off rather genuinely. Though guilty of othering and stereotyping, it captures at close range the light entertainment and innocent socialization that characterize swing music. As Frank Krutnik suggests, this Harlem sequence “is the closest the film comes to visualizing the possibility of a *Gemeinschaft* community” (in Clarke 1997: 97-8). By dramatizing white people as a racial minority in what ultimately is a white film category, “the scene overturns the containment of blacks as a servile minority in US society” (ibid). The scene at Big Jim’s even begins before the protagonists enter, further eliminating the convention of white point of view. In this sense, *When Strangers Marry* contrasts many of the representations of jazz in the noirs of the late ‘40s.

### 2.3 *The Crimson Canary*

John Hoffman’s *The Crimson Canary* (1945) is another early “low-grade noir” whose diegetic jazz stands out from other depictions of black music in ‘40s noir, but for different reasons (Svehla 1997: 185). The short explanation for this is that the film features bebop. This forgotten B flick, which was produced and distributed by Universal Pictures, features a relatively lengthy musical number by the bop innovating saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and his orchestra. Hawkins’ band holds next to no connection to the narrative, except for the fact that the white protagonists also are jazz musicians. The story begins in a downtown Los Angeles nightclub called Vic’s Café where an all-white quintet are regular performers. This is until a beautiful female torch singer is murdered, and the quintet become prime suspects. Johnny (Danny Morton), the group’s drummer, was infatuated with the alluring singer and thinks he might have drunkenly killed her, but cannot remember. The murder is investigated by Roger Quinn (John Littel), a police detective who also happens to be an avid jazz connoisseur. Danny (Noah Beery Jr.), the group’s trumpeter, wants to protect his bandmate and insists that they should immediately flee to San Francisco. Unable to find work up north, they here have to watch Hawkins’ orchestra perform instead. Hawkins’ band, which features Howard McGhee (trumpet), Charles Thompson (piano), Denzil Best (drums), and Oscar Pettiford

(bass), provides a progressive 2-minute long musical interlude to this mounting murder mystery. All these artists were originators of the bebop style and movement. According to John Chilton, Hawkins' orchestra "kept one foot in the swing groove but stuck the other limb out in determined exploration" (1990: 223). The onscreen pianist was in fact supposed to be Thelonious Monk, Hawkins' bandmate at the time. Monk, however, didn't want to travel from his home in New York to California which, according to himself, "was at the other end of the world, far from the musical center of the universe" (Kelley 2009: 103). Hawkins' orchestra is playing "Hollywood Stampede," a "bebop-style" composition with an "irregular, elusive quality" and "penetrating tone, commanding presence, and unusually good control of the extreme upper register" (Owens 1995: 249; DeVeaux 1997: 65, 405). McGhee recalled that "Stampede" brought about a "disorienting effect" that left older generations "looking at us with their mouths wide open" because "they couldn't understand it" (in DeVeaux 1997: 409). The all-white audience in the film certainly look at them with their mouths open too, but merely out of pure delight and exhilaration. In contrast to other nightclub clienteles in '40s noir, which are discussed later, the patrons aren't dancing but sitting and listening attentively. This has to do with the facts that the fast rhythms of bebop were, as opposed to swing music, considered undanceable and designed for more intellectually advanced listeners. The only patrons who aren't visibly moved by the music are the protagonists who sure wish they were performing on the nightclub bandstand instead. The bop-inflected performance of Hawkins' band is ingeniously complemented by their cool social postures and professional attires. Originally a big band swing musician, Hawkins was "determined not to take his style back into the past simply to win approval from old fans" (Chilton 1990: 270). "He is not the prototype of the affable extrovert," Rex Stewart notes, continuing that "Coleman presents a dignified façade that often borders on the cool side" (ibid: 27). Hawkins, unsmiling and eyes closed, certainly keeps his cool in the film, despite the excitement of his diegetic audience, which he completely ignores. Equally detached is Oscar Pettiford who, with a cigarette limping out of his mouth, looks a little high from a possible marihuana consumption. Coolest of the bunch, however, is Howard McGhee; perhaps the only black musician to ever wear sunglasses in a classical film noir. Formal attires, closed eyes, drugs, and cool shades were all social signifiers of bebop, and ways of delicately revolting against established structures in society. I wonder what allowed for such a progressive audiovisual representation of jazz in this relatively early film noir. Indeed, the performance of Hawkins' band looks more like belonging to a late '50s noir than to a mid '40s noir. To be sure,

*The Crimson Canary* is an extremely unknown film, and certain details may have passed unnoticed by the production code administration, if not ignored altogether. Another motive lies in the fact screenwriter Henry Blankfort was a liberal jazz aficionado who “included interludes for improvised music” in his screenplay (Chilton 1990: 223). Universal even desired Hawkins’ group to appear in the film, at least more than the saxophonist wanted to appear himself: “Hawkins wasn’t carried away with the prospect of becoming a movie star” (ibid). This potentially opened up for Hawkins and his bandmates to set their own terms, avoiding well-worn stereotypes and delivering an expression of modern jazz that was far beyond its time for a ‘40s Hollywood film. Although bop became the most popular idiom of jazz in the immediate postwar years, film noir refrained from incorporating the style into its nightclub sequences. If bop surfaces on screen and soundtracks, which it seldomly does, it is explicitly linked to white violence and decadence. As I show in the remainder of this chapter, swing remained the go-to background music for most noir filmmakers in the late ‘40s.



4. The Coleman Hawkins Orchestra performing “Hollywood Stampede” in *The Crimson Canary* (1945).

## 2.4 *The Dark Corner*

If swing was on its way out of the American mainstream by the late '40s, the Henry Hathaway flicks *The Dark Corner* (1946) and *Kiss of Death* (1947) suggest otherwise. In the former, Eddie Heywood and his Orchestra perform for a dancing white crowd in a New York hotspot called the High-Hat Club. Heywood and his band are here playing their own composition "Heywood Blues." Bradford Galt (Mark Stevens), the film's protagonist, is fresh out of jail after serving time for a crime he did not commit. Restarting his job as a private detective, Galt is once again being framed for a crime: "I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me." He enlists his secretary Kathleen (Lucille Ball) to help him track down his wrongdoers.



5. "Music Like That Does Something To Me:" A High-Hatted Heywood in *The Dark Corner* (1946).

The sequence at the High-Hat opens with a gigantic silhouette of Heywood, associating his musicianship with the noir shadows that are elsewhere assigned debased white characters. This is followed by the actual, brightly lit image of the pianist. From his dark silhouette to his spotlighted

appearance, Heywood drastically goes from pitch black to ghost white in a matter of seconds. The camera then moves down to his flawless fingerwork which is either perfectly synchronized or played out in real time. As opposed to the grinning Flennoy in *When Strangers Marry* (1944), there is no feverish edge to Heywood's piano playing. According to Marshal Royal, Heywood's saxophonist at the time, "Eddie was a very nervous person, very high strung, and he stuttered extensively but he was a nice guy and all he wanted was for the fellows to play good music" (in Gordon 1996: 81). Following Heywood's close-up, the camera pauses briefly on the unidentified bass player whose face is out of frame. This is presumably Ernie Shepard, the bassist in Heywood's septet. The remaining band members are only heard on the soundtrack. Unfortunately, this is all we see from Heywood's orchestra, which is significantly attenuated from what was outlined in the screenplay. Jay Dratler's shooting script, dated October 31, 1945, details the dispersal of medium close shots on several band members:

MED. SHOT - BASS FIDDLER

He swings the gut basket around and around as he thumps its back. CAMERA PANS to a FLASH of a drummer working over his skin -- then PANS to a FLASH of a trumpeter blowing sweet and hot, then PANS to pianist. HOLD ON pianist as his fingers ripple the keys.

MED. SHOT - SHOOTING DOWN - FROM PIANIST'S ANGLE

at the group of youngsters around the bandstand. The band winds up for its blood-pounding finale (1945: 38).

Dratler's description excludes racial labels, but the music is defined with such exuberant language that it was more than likely originally intended for black performers. For '40s filmmakers, there were pretty much only black musicians who could work over their skin, blow sweet and hot, and ripple the piano keys, imageries that implicitly underscore the sexual aspects that white culture had mythologized jazz with. Dratler seems to have drafted the sequence with a piano playing bandleader in mind. If the filmed scene was visually executed in accordance to its written counterpart, we would also have seen, in addition to Heywood and Shepard, Keg Purnell (drums) and Parr Jones (trumpet) playing on the diegetic bandstand. For that matter, Britt Woodman (trombone), Henry Coker (trombone), and Marshal Royal (sax), the remaining members of Heywood's orchestra, could also have been allocated screen presences. All seven musicians were



thus behind the recording of “Heywood Blues” and are heard on the soundtrack. For all we know, Heywood’s band members were probably present during production but inconveniently located just off camera. Based on the scene description, however, one could in fact expect a set of painfully stereotyped and mythologized entertainers represented in the film. Perhaps it was for the better that Hathaway only stayed faithful to the “HOLD ON” pianist Heywood, who represents himself with a detached refinement. Dratler ambitiously details a point of view shot from Heywood’s perspective, but this is not actualized in the film. Black point of view might have been too daring for a major Hollywood production at this point in time. The filmed scene nonetheless visualizes the light entertainment and white appreciation of swing music as described in the screenplay. Following the sparing images of Heywood’s orchestra, the camera pans out over the unintelligibly packed dance floor, occupied by white couples in impressive chiaroscuro. The whitening of Heywood and blackening of white patrons certainly distort predefined racial categories and convey racial ambiguity. Rather than directly linking African-American music to evil or anxiety, the jazzclub is here presented as, in the words of Alain Silver, “a safe haven where they can feel good and forget about all their problems” (DVD commentary 2005). Which undeniably applies to female protagonist Kathleen. Tapping the table with her fingers, she stimulatingly outcries: “Oh boy, music like that does something to me.” Galt, however, isn’t that fuzzed: “Yeah, they’re okay.” His desultory answer suggests that his mind is preoccupied with a different matter than Heywood’s music. “You weren’t even listening,” Kathleen intuitively counters. Kathleen’s nonetheless reveals that her “maternal instinct” has been “aroused,” declaring her readiness to support her targeted male employer and future husband. Kathleen’s erotically charged utterings and zealous delivery of these utterings, indeed deriving from the oomph of the music, covertly underline the sexual connotations related to jazz. Sure, what exactly the music ‘does’ to her is verbally unspecified, but given the historical perception of jazz as excessive sexual signifier, one can only assume that the music is arousing her sexual appetite and romantic interest in Galt.

## 2.5 *Kiss of Death*

If Heywood’s band in *The Dark Corner* provokes the stimulus of white female sexuality, can the black trio in Hathaway’s next noir *Kiss of Death* (1947) be said to buttress the ferocity of white male criminality. Starring newcomer Richard Widmark in his first role, this 20th Century Fox film is about a criminal partnership gone wrong. Widmark plays Tommy Udo, a murderous psychopath that laughs like the devil and throws paralyzed grandmothers down staircases for fun. Udo oozes

a cartoonish, beatnik, and evil for evil's sake attitude unmatched by other noir antagonists. Of course, Udo receives his illicit energy from the rhythms of New York's swing joints. Upon finding his table at Club 66, his regular nightly hotspot, Udo can't help but gaze at the black swing combo playing in the background. The band, which is fronted by J.C. Heard (drums) and featuring Al McKibbin (bass) and Jimmy Jones (piano), is performing the songs "Beautiful Moods" and "Congo Conga." They grin stereotypically and look subserviently at their seated white audience. Humming and mimicking the rhythms of Heard's group, Udo euphorically uproars: "How do you like that music, man? Right upstairs, huh? Come on, send it, Jack!" Given that Udo just a few scenes ago pushed a wheelchair-bound woman down a staircase, his jumbled addiction to the rhythms certainly demonize the black swing musicians. Their instrumental onslaught becomes a metaphoric extension for Udo's prior savageries. This implication is not diminished by the fact that Udo is the only patron visibly moved by the music. Although Club 66 will "be jumpin' in a couple of hours," as Udo excitedly anticipates, its remaining clientele appears rather restrained and oblivious to the presence of Heard's band. Screenwriter Ben Hecht, however, had a slightly different nightclub representation in mind. Hecht's shooting script, dated February 27, 1947, describes the venue, which is theorized as "Sunset No. 2," as a "hot place" for "the various underworlds" and links "the underworlds of music, sex, and crime" to "hot jump jazz:"

#### INT. BASEMENT CAFE IN HARLEM

It is a hot place for men and women of the various underworlds – the underworlds of music, sex, and crime. It is after midnight, and the cafe, known as 'SUNSET NO. 2', is getting going. A seven-piece band is playing hot jump jazz. Waiters glide expertly in and out among the crowded tables. Pugilists, touts, yeggs, slim and elegant youths, bewizzened madams – all sit drinking, talking, and laughing. There is no ornamental decor; there are no events taking place. But there is high fever in the joint. It comes out of the wild, quick faces, the vivid animation of the people, the sleepy, rockabye swaying of the hoppers sitting in their seats and beaming on their inner dreams (1947: 99).

The carousing atmosphere established in Hecht's description probably applies more to Club 66 after Udo's "couple of hours" have passed by. Which is a passage of nightclub afterhours that we don't get to see in the film. The association between the "underworlds of crime" and "hot jump jazz" is nevertheless visually materialized through Udo's irrepressible affection for Heard's trio.

Hecht's script, however, details the presence of seven jazz musicians, but in Hathaway's film there are only three. Based on the scripts he had to work with, the director certainly toned down the prevalence of diegetic jazz both in *The Dark Corner* and in *Kiss of Death*. Indeed, as Harold Pomainville writes, Hathaway pulverized every script he was assigned with "handwritten annotations, graphs, deletions, scene changes, and additional dialogue," contending that "the best way for him to put his imprint on a picture was during preproduction" (2016: 275). Surely, this slang-infused description sketched by Hecht reminds more of The Fisherman Club in *D.O.A.* (1949) than of the film it is written for. If Hathaway's picture stayed more faithful to Hecht's description, which clearly includes more animated patrons than its visual counterpart, the strident association between Udo and jazz could be less evident.



6. "How Do You Like That Music:" J.C. Heard, Al McKibbon, and Jimmy Jones in *Kiss of Death* (1947).

One cannot dispute Widmark's amazingly convincing debut screen performance. In preparation for the role, Widmark revealed that he "did make a tour of the swing joints on 52nd street and Greenwich Village just to get that hopped-up feeling" (in May 2000: 221). His inimitable noir antagonist can also be considered an early embodiment of the beatnik stereotype. Prevalent in the '50s, 'beatnik' was an exaggerated media construction designed to mock the so-called nonconforming individuals of The Beat Generation. This stereotype took the beats and everything they venerated, such as political rebelliousness, spiritualism, and jazz music, to artificially extreme heights. Initially circulating in newspaper cartoons, and later more extensively in movies, the flamboyant beatniks were characterized by low moral standards, criminality, and a hyperbolic use of jazz musician slang. A cartoonish character himself, Udo undoubtedly possesses these traits and can be viewed as a prelusive personification of the beatnik figure. The beatnik aura that Tommy Udo exudes, for not to mention *Kiss of Death*'s dubious connection between white violence and black music, reach new dramatic heights in *D.O.A.* (1949) and its infamously primitive nightclub sequence. But while the latter film is generally credited for providing the first audiovisual depiction of beatnik culture, the former may have sparked the first flame.

## 2.6 *The Unsuspected*

The perturbing trend of associating African-American band music with the vehement cruelty of white characters continued in Michael Curtiz's *The Unsuspected* (1947). This time, an ostensibly innocent Jo Jones combo becomes stylistically and sequentially implicated in the first of many murder schemes. This Warner Bros film follows Victor Grandison (Claude Rains), a 'true crime' radio storyteller so fascinated by murder that he becomes twisted enough to commit them himself. His killing streak is simultaneously initiated and fueled by his vigilant plan to overtake his niece's fortune. When Roslyn Wright (Barbara Woodell), Grandison's secretary, begins to suspect the fishy behavior and mannerisms of her boss, she becomes the first of several downright people to be physically exterminated from the world. The build-up to and immediate aftermath of this murder, moreover, is racially illustrated through the uneasy amalgamation of dark shadows and black bodies. Curtiz's picture opens with a tracking shot of a wall-reflected silhouette (that of Grandison), slowly emerging up the stairs of a dark mansion. Roslyn is on the phone and witnesses an enormously dark, threatening, and unknown presence approach her. She screams wildly before the camera cuts to the other end of the phone conversation which is an up-scale white nightclub. Here we listen to the swing music and watch the showmanship of an all-black Jo Jones quintet for

about 10 seconds before Curtiz cuts back to the mansion. Grinning before a dancing white nightclub clientele, Jones' band is performing George Gershwin's vastly popular swing standard "I Got Rhythm." Significantly, Jones and his bandmates have on top of their black skins the shadows that previously carried Grandison's menacing silhouette. This racially uncanny correlation is heightened by a seemingly premeditated cut back to the mansion, exposing the silhouette of a strangled Roslyn hanging from a chandelier. Images of the strangling must have been too much for the censors, offering us the sight and sound of black music instead. In effect, while we have watched and listened to the exceptional swing of Jo Jones, who by many is considered to be the greatest swing drummer of all time, a murder has occurred. It is here the sequencing of images, which is what Metz calls the *Grande Syntagmatique*, in conjunction with what jazz and noir shadows historically and thematically represent, racially incriminate black music in *The Unsuspected's* distinctive noir tropes. The film has for its concealment of debased whiteness both stylistic and racial black masks: signature noir visual effects and the close proximity of African-American jazz players. Making matters worse, this worrying yet stereotypical transitioning seems to have been somewhat preplanned at script level. Ranald MacDougall's screenplays, draft and shooting script respectively, suggest that "the piano is playing a boogie number" and instructs "The SOUND of the nightclub up FULL" right before the cut to the silhouette of the murdered secretary (1946: 3). MacDougall mentions no band, let alone black musicians, but he mentions boogie which is a black musical style, and noir conventions imply that the full sound of a noir nightclub should feature the auditory contribution of jamming black jazz artists. While not scrupulously detailing the racial source of the music, MacDougall's descriptions contain some degree of planning in terms of what the nightclub sound should bring to the immediate atmosphere and narrative development, descriptions that Curtiz's screened version, dejectedly enough, remained more than faithful to.



7. Dark Jazz: a Jo Jones Quintet in *The Unsuspected* (1947).

## 2.7 *Out of the Past*

In Jacques Tourneur's quintessential noir *Out of the Past* (1947), private eye Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum) visits an all-black jazzclub to question the maid of the missing Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer). Or, she isn't exactly missing per se, but has escaped the misogynistic dominance of her husband Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas). Whit assigns Jeff with the task of bringing her back to his patriarchy. Jeff's investigation starts in Harlem with the interrogation of Eunice Leonard (Theresa Harris), Kathie's household maid. Perhaps Eunice knows a thing or two about the disappeared housewife's immediate whereabouts. As *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949) tenderly demonstrate, white women frequently developed intimate bonds with their black female servants. It is not unthinkable that Kathie shared with Eunice the location of her destination. And so Jeff figures. The Harlem club sequence opens with a close-up of trumpeter Gerald Wilson who, rendered in low-key lighting, blows a brief bop-inflected solo into the camera. Albeit short, Wilson offers an extremely rare expression of bebop in a '40s film noir and lends musical currency and

authenticity to *Out of the Past*'s fictional jazz venue. His solo then glides over into the orchestral sound of his bandmates who are all playing the popular swing standard "The First Time I Saw You." Wilson's bandmates appear super swiftly in a panning and it's impossible to recognize their identities. But they are likely to be members of his own orchestra which was enjoying national success at the time. If that is the case, it is reasonable that Wilson, as the bandleader, is the only musician privileged in a close-up. Since his appearance as a sideman to Jimmie Lunceford in *Blues in the Night* (1941), Wilson had gone on to form his own big band. The Gerald Wilson Orchestra was a racially integrated, "hard driving swing band" that "infused elements of bebop" and "was considered the most adventuresome big band of its day" (Tumpak 2008: 94). Wilson even made arrangements for bop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie back in 1945 before the latter had formed his own band. Chris Sheridan notes that Wilson's "boppish" band was "more thoroughly modern – despite the swing-styled rhythm section – than any of the other" big bands in the immediate postwar years (in Loza 2018: 114). Wilson's bop/swing hybrid is evident in the transition from boppish trumpet soloing to the orchestral swing that auditorily dominates the Harlem nightclub sequence. "The First Time I Saw You" is heard countless of times throughout the movie and becomes the main theme for Jeff's and Kathie's fatal infatuation. The fact that it is first played diegetically by a black band, and initiated by a shadowy trumpeter, racialize the darkness and destruction that the love theme subversively underscores. Kathie, the cynical femme fatale who double-crosses Jeff, similarly possesses a racial source in her maid Eunice. As Paula Rabinowitz suggests, Eunice is Kathie's double: "Coded through dress, lighting, and mise en scene as a femme fatale in her own right, Eunice is a replicant of Kathie's aura ... Eunice stands before Bailey as the 'prerequisite' of another woman he has never seen" (2002: 61). William Luhr, similarly, notes how "people of color and foreign places become symbolically, although never causally, associated with her evil" (2012: 114). The external blackness of the maid symbolically presages the internal darkness of the femme fatale. As Rabinowitz remarks, Eunice "is the original woman of the dark" (2002: 61). While Eunice is literally dark by skin, is Kathie figuratively so by virtue of noir shadows and her sinful actions. "The First Time I Saw You" becomes their musical common denominator, played during Jeff's initial meetings with both Eunice and Kathie, linking the two women together. In fact, the Harlem nightclub sequence as a whole function as a racial metaphor for the thematic darkness that awaits the male protagonist. His journey to definitive doom begins there. Following Wilson's solo, Nicolas Musuraca's cinematography offers an interior establishing shot, displaying the dancing

and drinking of joyous African-Americans. Mitchum's character, cooler than ever, stands at the entrance door for a moment, contemplating the venue from a slight distance. Jeff is greeted by the headwaiter who is an old acquaintance of his and who gracefully escorts him to Eunice's table. There is a penetrative quality in the manner that the camera tracks Jeff's wandering progression through the club. The sequence could effectively more or less begin with his immediate questioning of Eunice. Instead is his privileged white identity put against the dark masses as he advances through the space. This build-up is evocative of the colonial process Gayatri Spivak calls "worlding," referring to the overwriting of foreign land simply by being there: "When colonizers come a world, they encounter it as uninscribed earth upon which they write their inscriptions" (1990: 129). The elevated walkthrough of the white protagonist reinscribes the black nightclub which, at least within the world of film noir, is unknown and unseen territory. When Jeff finally sits down the camera takes his point of view. His perspective, that is, the white camera eye, dictates the diegetic backdrop of the place. Not only is his whiteness highlighted against chiaroscuro painted black patrons, but it is even marked against his dark trench coat which takes up large portions of the screen. Jeff Markham is, as his surname almost suggests, racially marked by way of costume and circumstance.





8. More Harlem Jazz: Gerald Wilson in *Out of the Past* (1947).

The filmed sequence mirrors only partially its initial description in the revised screenplay. Daniel Mainwaring's script, dated October 4, 1946, not only highlights the whiteness of Jeff but is loaded with shocking racial signifiers:

INT. HARLEM NIGHT CLUB – NIGHT

CLOSEUP - trumpet as it blasts out a phrase of hot MUSIC. CAMERA PULLS BACK, revealing: Little negro joint. There is no white man in the place until Jeff saunters in and pauses in the doorway. He looks around at smoky walls, the shiny, grinning faces of the dancers on the tiny floor, the sweating band, the row of booths crowded along the walls. He stands there, lighting a cigarette a moment. Then we see him say something to the headwaiter and the headwaiter, a gigantic dinge, leads him to the booth (1946: 21).

It is peculiar to see that the script for probably the most celebrated film noir had such a racist description of black culture. But Mainwaring's derogatory labels are thankfully not envisioned in Tourneur's filmed version. *Out of the Past* displays no "shiny, grinning faces" let alone a "sweating band." Wilson's bandmates are, like Heywood's in *The Dark Corner*, not permitted to be visually identified onscreen. Gerald Wilson's trumpet solo is neither traditional "hot music" but an expression of musical dissonance and artistically inclined jazz. The headwaiter, too, is not "a gigantic dinge" but appears friendly, sophisticated, and dignified. Jeff's ensuing conversation with Eunice, which I turn to in a moment, is similarly not stereotyped but candidly reveals a classy and outspoken black woman unafraid to resist the supremacy of white men. Mainwaring's accentuation on white male point of view and the regional exclusivity of this whiteness, however, is more than visually encapsulated in the film. Both the scripted and screened version overemphasize that Jeff is the only white person visiting this Harlem club. The eurocentric foregrounding of Jeff further indicates the hipness of the white protagonist. His alleged racial flexibility thrives throughout the sequence. In introducing Jeff to Eunice, the headwaiter prepares her with the information that the two men are old friends. The implication being that the black woman would may not want to talk to Jeff if he wasn't to some extent affiliated with black culture. As Mainwaring's script details, the headwaiter gives Eunice "a knowing nod, indicating that Jeff has his approval" (ibid: 22). Mitchum's character exhibits a distinctive rootlessness and geographic experience, transcending contemporaneous segregation practices and socio-political restrictions. Jeff possesses associates on every level and in every corner of society. Whether it is Harlem, Lake Tahoe, San Francisco or Acapulco, Jeff eloquently blends in as if they all were his hometowns. Unlike the westcoast glamour of Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly*, Jeff is a minimalist bohemian who wears a rumpled trench coat and drives an old station wagon. Jeff's mannerisms and ways of carrying himself correspond with the star persona of Mitchum. Lee Server describes his persona as "the movies' outside man, without roots or ties ... much more in the style of some hipster musician than any of previous species of Hollywood movie star" (2002: xiv, 176). Nor is his character in *Out of the Past* exactly estranged from Mitchum's attitude in real life. Server analogizes: "With Mitchum, self-image and screen image seemed to bleed together with a particular compatibility" (ibid: xv). It is not unlikely that Mitchum, who was a big fan of jazz, would feel just as comfortable as Jeff in an all-black nightclub. Along these lines, Mitchum certainly brings bits of 'himself' to his screen performance. If there are, in the African-American sense of the word, genuinely 'cool' white

protagonists in film noir, Mitchum's are the ones to look for (and Bogart's). Harry Carey Jr, Mitchum's acting colleague, writes: "I don't know if they even had the word back then - but Mitchum was *cool*. If they didn't have that expression he must have invented it, because he was the coolest guy that ever lived" (in Server 2002: 139). Already in use by Lester Young, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker, Mitchum didn't invent the expression. But he undoubtedly contributed to the aestheticization and popularization of the restrained look of cool. Jeff's conversancy in Harlem, then, does not exist in a vacuum. It is partly informed by Jeff's vagabonding characteristics and by the socially dissident lifestyle and persona of the legendary actor.

Jacques Tourneur, however, was regularly criticized for racial stereotyping in his movies. In a 1971 interview with the French film magazine *Positif*, Tourneur turns to *Out of the Past* in his combat of such accusations:

I've always refused to caricature blacks. I've never or almost never showed them as domestics. I've tried to give them a profession, to have them speak normally without drawing any comic effect. Watch in *Out of the Past* the scene in the nightclub where there are only black people, look at the way they're dressed and filmed, the elegance in the young woman responding to Mitchum. Several times I've been accused of being a 'nigger lover' and for long months I was out of the studios for that reason (in Fujiwara 1998: 92).

Although the sequence somewhat exoticizes blackness and elevates the whiteness of the protagonist, Tourneur should still be credited for steering considerably away from the racist description provided in Mainwaring's screenplay. The exchange between Jeff and Eunice, moreover, is not your ordinary mixed-race encounter between a white male and a black female in a Hollywood film from this era. In the script, Eunice is instructed to say *ah* rather than *I*, *suh* rather than *sir*, *mistuh* rather than *mister*, *mahself* rather than *myself*; degenerate linguistic decorations that were frequent in the constructions of black characters that white filmmakers created for the screen. But Eunice resists Jeff and generally defies the supremacy of white men. Her stylish attire, confidence, and flirtatious cadence all deviate from other representations of African-American women in golden age cinema. Though Eunice knows, she has no intention of revealing to Jeff the site of Kathie's hidings. She is all too aware of the reigning chauvinism with which Whit has misused his wife: Kathie is better off on the run than in the hands of her dominant husband.

Protecting her female employer in a gesture of unified womanhood, Eunice cryptically suggests that Kathie vaccinated herself for a travel to warmer pastures, and falsely, to Florida. But as Jeff remarks in voice-over, you don't get vaccinated for Florida. In the noir underworld, there is only one warmer place of escape and that is Mexico. In essence, Harris' character has disclosed her female racial counterpart by virtue of contradictory information and noir convention. Yet Eunice, who dresses and behaves like an African-American femme fatale might, represents a subversive sexiness at least compared to the linear submissiveness of Lottie (Butterfly McQueen) and Sybil (Frances Williams) in the aforementioned melodramas. Eunice articulates herself with an alluring assurance that anticipates the darkness of Kathie. In fact, the assertive maid could have made the perfect femme fatale if only blacks were granted leading roles in the film industry at the time. Theresa Harris is praised for her performance. James Naremore remarks that "she responds to Jeff's questions without a trace of subservience, all the while conveying a wry intelligence" (1998: 240). Frank Krutnik, similarly, writes: "Although its main point is to emphasize the ease with which the private-eye can move through the city's various worlds, this scene is nonetheless free of Hollywood's familiar racial condescension" (in Clarke 1997: 105). The African-American clientele in this Harlem site is indisputably reproduced with refinement and sophistication. The sequence offers much welcomed and daring insights into what black nightlife could possibly look like in the postwar years. It ingeniously depicts, at least for a '40s Hollywood film, a joyful and humanized minority group that is dancing and drinking to the rhythms of swing music. Certainly, the Harlem in *Out of the Past* is far from connoting the level of otherness of the Harlem in *When Strangers Marry* (1944), a film from only three years before. Still there are inevitable markers, of which some lurk beyond the creative and social control of the filmmakers, that elevate the purity of whiteness and suture dominant racial ideology. These markers are, as I have shown, inherent in the music, mise-en-scene, setting, and the visual style.

## 2.8 *D.O.A.*

The mythification of jazz as primitive, exotic, and decadent is nowhere as explicit as in Rudolph Mate's *D.O.A.* (1949). This celebrated B feature follows Frank Bigelow (Edmund O'Brien), a freelance accountant who decides to take a one-week vacation in San Francisco but ends up fatally poisoned. The location of his sudden contamination, of course, is a Frisco jazz joint named The Fisherman Club. With hours left to life, Bigelow spends the rest of the film tracking down his own

killer. Before that, *Mate* showcases the most racialized, grotesque, and extravagant jazz number that film noir audiences have ever seen. The Fishermen comprise an all-black quintet that plays hot jazz, or jive music, as it is referred to in the film. In the first draft, dated July 9, 1949, Russell Rouse and Clarence Greene imply that the Fishermen are practicing bebop. The bandleader is labeled and crowned “THE FISHERMAN – KING OF BOP” (this was altered to “THE FISHERMAN – CROWN PRINCE OF JIVE” in the shooting script) (1949: 29; 28). Although the Fishermen are not playing bop, such a label, combined with an otherwise primitive description, illustrate the contemporary white perception that bebop is a culturally inferior musical style. The onscreen quintet is fronted by James Von Streeter (saxophone) and features Cake Wichard (drums), Shifty Henry (bass), Ray LaRue (piano), and Teddy Buckner (trumpet). At the time, Streeter lead a popular group called James Von Streeter & His Wig Poppers, of which Wichard and Henry were members. The Wig Poppers thrived on the westcoast jazz scene of Central Avenue in the immediate postwar years. When Streeter was cast in *D.O.A.*, he brought Wichard and Henry along. LaRue and Buckner were added from elsewhere to fill the diegetic quintet. Peculiarly enough, the honky saxophonist was a huge fan of Erich von Stroheim and therefore adopted the ‘von’ in the Austrian-American director’s name. Streeter also suffered from a heroin addiction, as many jazz musicians did, resulting in an early death in 1960 at the age of thirty. Most famous of the five is nonetheless Buckner, an old school hornblower whose idol was Louis Armstrong and whose career spanned almost sixty years. In the film, they are playing the frenzied standard “Fisherman’s Jive.” Or at least that’s what we think. The audio recording reportedly came off so blurry that the producer hired a different set of artists to overdub the Fishermen. In reality, one is actually listening to Maxwell Davis (sax), Lee Young (drums), George Boujje (bass), Ray Turner (piano), and Ernie Royal (trumpet). This is slightly unconventional because, as far as musical dubbing in classical cinema is concerned, it usually worked the other way around: the musicians mimicked to pre-recorded sound. The filmmakers presumably intended for the honky sounds of Streeter & company to survive the final cut, but the rapid shooting schedule and indistinct auditory reproduction encouraged the alternative solution. Indeed, it is sometimes the case in low budget B movies that music recorded in real time suffers from poor audio quality. Yet these films, such as *The Dark Corner* (1946) and *Shoot to Kill* (1947), evade some of the trappings intrinsic in what Leonard Feather frustratingly calls ‘canned’ performance (see Gabbard 1995: 28). *D.O.A.*, then, opts for technical quality rather than musical authenticity, a priority that, in the most cynical sense,

can be defended. More than the sound itself, it is really the *sight* of jazz that is racially staggering in the film. While other noir nightclubs restrict black musicians to the periphery, the untamed ‘jiving’ of the Fishermen is, at least for the white protagonist, reaching a bit too close. In typical noir fashion, the sequence dramatizes the fears and anxieties that blackness and racial otherness thrust into the white imagination. The sequence captures the ferocious communication that escalates between the black quintet and its white audience. It rapidly crosscuts between the stereotyped musicians and the vibrant clientele. Its quick succession of shots is almost as rhythmic as the music itself, accentuating the narrative paranoia. The Fishermen are sweating, grinning and grotesquely gazing both at the crowd and into the camera. They are certainly acting as Rouse’s and Greene’s shooting script, dated August 11, 1949, instructed them to:

INT. JIVE JOINT - NIGHT

... CLOSE SHOT of ‘THE FISHERMAN’, whose face goes through various contortions and expressions as he plays a fast jive number. CAMERA MOVES to pick up a SAXOPHONE PLAYER, then a BASS FIDDLE PLAYER, a TRUMPET PLAYER, and finally, a DRUMMER, who are all playing as wildly as the piano player, and going through similar gyrations. The music has a strange wild, primitive beat that is almost surrealistic (1949: 28).

Rouse’s and Greene’s script, like Mate’s film, hideously conforms to the dominant myth that black derived jazz is primitive, animalistic, and inarticulate. In the film, we first see a close-up of Streeter who, with sweat dripping down his face, sturdily and dancingly blows his saxophone at the center of the bandstand. The camera pulls back, revealing the whole band and the cartoonishly jumping crowd. Bigelow, however, is always on-guard, cautiously distributing his critical eyes around the locale. The smoky, tumultuous atmosphere of the venue unsettles the mind of the protagonist. LaRue, who is audaciously attacking the piano keys, directs a steady grin towards a dancing white woman. “Cool, cool, really cool,” she ecstatically replies. Of course, this interracial exchange is merely suggested through the sequencing of shots. Given the deterring taboos attached to the notion of mixed-race, sexually potent contact, the film is, as David Butler writes, “careful not to show black and white characters in the same shot” (2002: 69). LaRue keeps playing, now looking into the camera lens while exercising other ludicrous mouth movements. Back to Streeter, who is pursuing his long-awaited solo. A long haired, beret wearing, and goatee bearded man, indeed looking like a beatnik, impulsively shouts towards the saxophonist: “blow up a storm, Fisherman!”

Streeter definitely blows up a storm. Following Streeter's solo, Wichard receives his moment of shine and exchange with white audience members. His persistent drumbeats evoke the suggestion of sexual arousal in a male and female bystander. "Go on, go on, go on," the man yells in a sexually exhilarating manner. Again, mixed-race interaction is achieved not by keeping racial counterparts in the same shot, but by swiftly crosscutting between their respective physiognomies. Wichard's drum solo follows the trend set in Robert Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944) where the drums also serve as signifier for excessive white sexuality. The drum solo in Joseph Losey's *The Big Night* (1951), a film I discuss later, similarly yet more much licentiously signifies vehemence and anxiety. Close-ups of the grotesquely looking jazz players are then intensified, culminating in the finale of their profligate number and the suspicious arrival of Bigelow's offender. Black musicians have rhythmically set the stage for the mysterious individual that fatally changes the course of the narrative. Racially othered music gives way for a morally othered presence.



9. "Blowin' Up a Storm:" The Fishermen in *D.O.A.* (1949).

*D.O.A.* devotes an unusual quantity of screen time to black jazz musicians, a devotion that boosts their uneasy association to the impending catastrophe. Bigelow's discomfort in the intimacy of their visceral energy further manifests a perplexing anxiety that foreshadows his untimely demise. The protagonist's point of view, being the perspective from which movie spectators watch, dictates the overall stance towards jazz in *D.O.A.* In fact, O'Brien's character differs from most noir protagonists in that they usually convey some degree of admiration for African-American source music. After consuming the poisoned bourbon, Bigelow candidly reveals to the attractive woman at the bar, who tellingly enjoys the music, that he "can live without it" (the protagonist is nonetheless unconsciously stimulated by the jazz to pursue this woman, despite being a married man). Bigelow remains one of few main leads in the cycle, in addition to the couple in *When Strangers Marry* (1944), to openly evince contempt not only for jazz but also for its diegetic audience. Unlike Tommy Udo, the only visible beatnik in a New York club, Bigelow is effectively the only person who is *not* a beatnik in this Frisco hotspot. By extension, The Fisherman Club is loaded with Tommy Udos. It is packed with exaggeratedly energized patrons that receive unlikely amounts of stimulation from African-American jazz. The joint is full of wild, slang-talking, drug abusing, and possibly criminal beatniks who go out of their way to spiritually and sexually embrace the rhythms of the Fishermen. In essence, black musicians aren't the only characters who are caricatured here. The white clientele is equally reduced to a homogenized beatnik mass, a stereotype that would continue to influence American popular culture for decades to come. As Rouse's and Greene's script suggests, the music "is something felt more than heard" and the patrons "appear to be deriving a sensual pleasure from the weird strains" (1949: 28-9). *D.O.A.*'s jazz sequence surely encapsulates the divine and indefatigable effect that jazz could have on white nonconforming individuals in a scarce manner that is perhaps only equaled in Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road." The exuberant rejoinder of the white clientele somewhat anticipates the unshackling impact jazz has on white audiences, and especially the character of Dean, in Kerouac's novel of eight years later. The primitivist conception that white culture had of jazz in the immediate postwar years, moreover, stays intact in both Mate's film and Kerouac's book. In both these works of fiction, the auditory contribution of jazz and attendance of black musicians appear to be needed in order for white hipsters to commerce with their own primitivism. Thankfully, Hollywood's stereotyping and othering of jazz declines after *D.O.A.*, with '50s film noir generally offering more



humanized and professional representations of black artists in the wake of the modern jazz revolution.

## 2.9 *Force of Evil*

Unlike the other hot jazz and swing musicians discussed thus far, whose upbeat rhythms hype their audiences and are uneasily tied to illicit sexuality and criminality, the black sextet in Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1949) alludes to the mellow late-night jam session. Polonsky, a self-professed and later blacklisted communist, presents in this highpoint noir, which he wrote and directed himself, a grim and uncompromising critique of American capitalism. Joe Morse (John Garfield), a corrupt and arrogant lawyer working for the numbers racket, goes to extreme lengths to upsurge his already substantial financial wealth. Polonsky's jazzclub sequence, which is strategically sequenced towards the end of the film, however, ultimately represents a moral turning point for the male protagonist. Diegetic jazz, moreover, refuses to associate itself with Joe's extravagance and degeneracy. Existentially tinged and inconsiderately drunk, Joe considers quitting his corruption when seated in a quiet Manhattan jazzclub with his girlfriend. The venue, which is called Iron Door, features a band that comprises a variety of Central Avenue greats including Buddy Collette (clarinet/sax), Dudley Brooks (piano), Dootsie Williams (trumpet), and Bert Brooks (drums). They lend a westcoast flavor to this New York crime thriller and offer an unusually serene sound compared to other jazz combos in '40s film noir. Collette, a modern jazz musician, was a socially conscious artist and leading figure in the evolution of the cool jazz movement. Collette was a longtime friend of Charles Mingus and a founding member of the Chico Hamilton Quintet, the group that rivaled the Modern Jazz Quartet for the "ultimate cool-jazz sound" in '50s Los Angeles (Santoro 2000: 114). According to Mingus, nobody reached Collette when it came to the following criteria: "Technique and discipline? Tone and articulation? Dedication and originality? Nobody touched Buddy" (ibid: 35). Collette left Hamilton's quintet in 1956, but if he had stayed on a bit longer, he could have supplemented the coolness of Hamilton's performance in *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). He still plays it cool in *Force of Evil*, however, and neither him or his bandmates are stereotyped, which is unusual for black musicians in '40s noir. They seem to casually interact with one another and naturally flow like their true selves would in a real performance setting. With their aspiring cool jazz and relaxed postures, they underprop the tranquility of *Force of Evil*'s anticlimactic nightclub sequence. In his screenplay, Polonsky seemed

keen to encapsulate not only their artistry but also their professionalism and impartiality. Polonsky describes:

#### INT. IRON DOOR NIGHT-CLUB - NIGHT

It is three o'clock in the morning. On the narrow bandstand is a FIVE-PIECE BAND, in business suits, knocking out the last languid tunes of a dull night. Piano and rhythm playing while the other men sit and talk, catching a smoke, everybody waiting for the mechanical hour of completion (in Schultheiss 1996: 104).

Polonsky's script offers a significantly more civilized description of jazz than, say, the scripts to *Blues in the Night* (1941), *The Dark Corner* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947), and *D.O.A.* (1949) do. His visual depiction, moreover, is altogether cooler and less primitive than virtually all black jazz bands in nightclubs from the first decade of film noir. The effortless underplaying of Collette's sextet establishes dramatic punctuation and underpins the disparaging mentality of the male antihero. The jazzclub is, to borrow a pertinent phrase from Nicholas Christopher, "providing an exterior landscape that reflects the interior workings of noir protagonists" (1997: 123). Accompanied by Collette's soothing saxophone, Joe tells his unimpressed girlfriend, Doris Lowry (Beatrice Pearson), that he is celebrating life because he will be dead the next morning: "dead, disbarred, done for, finished, kaput." Joe still finds the band too cool and the music too languorous. He tips the musicians with some pocket change to force them power up their volumes. As *Force of Evil* otherwise demonstrates, Joe is a very private person who has become fixated with confidentiality. Louder jazz will overwrite anything unorderedly that might come out of his drunk self. Joe hands the gratuity to the nightclub manager who in turn forwards it to Collette. The modern jazz artist is leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette, looking cool, and repeatedly checking his watch. Collette puts the money in his pocket and positions himself on the bandstand. Joe has informed the manager that he has "something private to tell the lady" and "don't want the whole world to hear." Positioned in the background, the band maintains a steady look at the deteriorating couple and presumably catches phrases from their bleak conversation. Unless, of course, they "play louder." But the sextet neglects Joe's commands. In fact, when the couple starts arguing, culminating in Joe forcefully gripping Doris' arms, they pause completely only to watch the meaningless melodramatics. Their timely intermission not only resists the demands of a white patron but acts as a sensitive stance against the aggression with which Joe treats his girlfriend.

Black musicians will no longer have their music associated with white noirish decadence. In this sense, it is not the sound of jazz, but the momentary lack of this sound, that brings nuance and meaning to the sequence. Similarly, their pause summarizes the dispiriting lows to which the protagonist has sunken. Not even a peripheral jazz band will fulfill his requests.



10. “Play Louder:” John Garfield unsuccessfully conducting a Buddy Collette band in *Force of Evil* (1949).

In an exasperated monologue, Joe spontaneously utilizes jazz, or “the horns blowing in the clubs,” as a metaphor for his own urban fears and sufferings. Doris tries to get away, but Joe holds her tightly:

You don’t know what it is to have real fear in you. You don’t know what it is to wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night and eat your lunch and read the papers and hear the horns blowing in the streets and the horns blowing in the clubs and all the time, wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, whatever you’re seeing, you’re afraid in your heart. Is that what life is?

She breaks free from his clutch and the band remains silent. Joe again instructs them, this time in a more authoritative fashion, to channel more power into their blows. They leave their cool behind and initiate a traditional New Orleans number, but only for a very brief period of time. The sextet again refuses to satisfy Joe's interfering musical conduction (similar insolent and belligerent behavior directed towards black musicians is evident in the opening sequence to Robert Altman's 1957 noir *The Delinquents*). Cued by Dudley Brooks' tender piano keys, Joe tells Doris that he's "running away with a pocket full of money" and wants her to come along. And she wants to, too, because "somehow, I love you." This is until the manager hands them the newspaper reading that Joe's brother, Leo, has been kidnapped. The manager gestures the band to stop, just as if turning off a jukebox. Joe, enraged, rushes out the nightclub and into a subsequent act that will push him towards the right side of the law. For Nicholas Christopher, "the nightclub is the film's most significant locale outside of his brother's office in the slums and the totemic office buildings where Joe himself does business" (1997: 120). The nightclub is the locale where jazz refuses to attend to his sleaze and where he ultimately decides to leave his corruption behind. Storyline aside, *Force of Evil* offers a welcoming suggestion of modern jazz in film noir that, fronted by artistically inclined musicians, looks to the future more than it reaffirms the past. Polonsky would go on to script another memorable nightclub sequence for *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), a late noir that employs modern jazz to convey the rebellious cool of a young black man that happens to be both protagonist and jazz musician.

## 2.10 *The Secret Fury*

The representation of the coolly intellectual jazz artist is significantly furthered in Mel Ferrer's RKO feature *The Secret Fury* (1950). Ferrer's picture even offers one of the first depictions of an interracial jazz band not only in film noir but in Hollywood cinema as a whole. This prospect had previously and most famously been suggested in the musical short *Jammin' The Blues* (1944) where one white musician, Barney Kessel, performed with a large ensemble of black artists including Lester Young, Jo Jones and Marie Bryant. Given the rigorous taboos attached to the sight of black and white musicians playing together, however, there was no way Kessel could appear in the same shots as his colleagues. In fact, his only visible parts are his hands, which were painted and shadowed to conceal his white complexion. It was not until the late '50s, with films such as *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) and *I Want to Live!* (1958), that Hollywood would properly ease up on the subject. Still, some other early depictions of racially diverse jazz combos in film

noir can be found in *The Secret Fury* (1950) and *The Strip* (1951). The former film revolves around Ellen (Claudette Colbert) who, standing on the altar ready to exchange wedding vows with her man David (Robert Ryan), is suddenly accused of already being married to someone else. Although her wedding papers suggest otherwise, she knows she has never married before. Ellen and David set out to visit Dave Barbour, the jazz guitarist she is supposedly married to. Upon entering Barbour's home, they are met by the sound of an upbeat jam session and a potent hush; the artists would rather not be disturbed in the midst of their sanctified session. Unlike other film noirs, where foregrounded dialogue invariably reduces jazz to coincidental music, jazz here takes first priority and delays the narrative development. Ellen and David wait in the hallway until Barbour's band finish their session. When the couple hears their instigation of cool jazz, they sneak into the living room where the band is playing. This is another early representation of cool jazz in film noir. They silently watch the musical séance which is now unveiled as performed by an interracial group: Barbour on guitar, Hal Schaefer on piano, Walt Yoder on bass and, finally, African-American Ernie Royal on trumpet. Royal is the only player who is nonwhite. This is remarkable because, as Sherri Tucker notes, "mixing was often a one-way street, usually taking place in the venues of black musicians. Black musicians were not allowed in most venues where white musicians played" (2001: 53). The sequence does well to conceal Royal's appearance and separate him from his fellow bandmates. In the initial shots of the group, the trumpeter is the only musician who is out of frame. When the protagonists enter the room, the artists have their backs positioned against the camera, covering their facial features. While obscuring Royal's racial identity, this positioning also adds to the intimate privatization of the session, as opposed to the more familiar nightclub jazz in film noir. This is followed by a medium close-up of the white musicians who unproblematically share the same image. Royal is crucially seated in slight distance from his colleagues, circumventing the boundaries that 'interracial close-ups' impose. This is not to say, however, that the trumpeter doesn't receive his individual close-up. Effortlessly blowing the horn, Royal oozes an introverted look of cool more reminiscent of Miles Davis than of other trumpeters who preceded him such as, say, Louis Armstrong or Teddy Buckner. His close-up is powerful because it singlehandedly reveals his belonging to an otherwise white group, a form of racial mixing that was not only taboo but also anomalous in films from the immediate postwar years.



11. Cool and Careless: Ernie Royal in *The Secret Fury* (1950).

As Vido Musso picks up his saxophone, Barbour puts aside his guitar to finally speak with his ‘wife’ Ellen. Much to the disdain of David, Barbour takes Ellen to another room for a private conversation. The cool jamming of the jazzmen is abruptly exterminated by the sound of a mysterious gunshot. Barbour is killed, and Ellen is set up as the prime suspect. Evocative of countless film noirs, jazz has provided the build-up to a watershed crime that changes the fate of the main protagonists. Nevertheless, *The Secret Fury* equally proposes the outlook of racially diverse combos playing artistically inclined jazz for their own enjoyment, ideals that are further developed in the films reaching the pinnacle of the classical noir era.

### 2.11 *The Strip*

Leslie Kardos’ *The Strip* (1951), a musical noir starring Mickey Rooney as a shaken-up jazz drummer, looks to the past even as it anticipates the future. Bulks of the film were shot on location

on the Sunset Strip and refreshingly showcase authentic interiors of its popular nightclubs. Kardos' film represents Louis Armstrong & His All-Stars, a mixed-race sextet featuring Armstrong (trumpet), Earl Hines (piano), Jack Teagarden (trombone), Barney Bigard (clarinet), Arvell Shaw (bass), and Cozy Cole (drums). Shaw and Cole are only heard on the soundtrack, however, overdubbing the appearances of white actors Lloyd Pratt and Hal Stover, respectively. Their visual omission from the film is, to my knowledge, unknown. As Bigard later remarked: "I don't know why, but Cozy wasn't in that film with us" (in Martyn 1985: 120). A possible reasoning for Cole's absence is the fact that Fluff (William Demarest), the owner of the nightclub in which they perform, desires Rooney's character to replace the initial drummer in Armstrong's band. In other words, it would be unlikely and uttermost disrespectful for a film actor to fictionally substitute Cole, one of the most celebrated drummers in jazz history. The absence of Shaw, however, is more suspicious. As Scott Nollen writes: "the presence of a white actor in Arvell Shaw's bassist spot is a mystery" (2004: 103). According to Mike Forbes, all members of the band were present during production (2015: 27). Kardos' picture would increase its authenticity if it offered spectators the prospect of both watching and hearing the All-Stars in its entirety. But this would equally have illustrated the outnumbering of white musicians on screen, a black primacy Hollywood arguably would want to circumvent. As most of the racially mixed bands in film noir demonstrate, such as those in *The Secret Fury* (1950), *The Big Night* (1951), *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) and *I Want to Live!* (1958), they never consist of more black musicians than white. *The Strip* is no different, displaying white actors take credit for black musical artistry and creating the illusion of a white majority in Armstrong's interracial sextet. In Cozy Cole's defense, the poor synchronization between image and sound make it obvious that Hal Stover cannot possibly be playing the drums. The idea of mixed-race jazz combos was controversial in and around itself, both in society and in the motion picture industry. Arthur Knight details: "Despite the excellence of the sound, some people will resist the sight of mixed jazz" (in Gabbard 1995: 16). Mixed groups, especially as far as film noir is concerned, usually feature either one or at the maximum two black musicians. In Armstrong, a black artist is nevertheless the frontman of the group, as Chico Hamilton is in *Sweet Smell of Success*. In *The Strip*, "he provides a deep-roots-oriented, avuncular musical source of approval for aspiring white musicians" (Barham in Mera 2017: 378). The film demonstrates a limited need for editorially separating the racial counterparts on the bandstand. In return, however, it contains jazz where Hollywood wants it: in the safe vacuum of traditional hot jazz. Far away

from the artistic inclination and political confrontation of the modern jazz movement, which by the early '50s was thriving on the westcoast, hot Dixieland jazz was performed by entertainers for the sake of audience pleasing and commercialization. As Krin Gabbard writes, "*The Strip* returns to a culture where the music is strictly for good times" (1996: 223). By 1951, one might expect a nightclub in Los Angeles, and particularly on the Sunset Strip, to be hosting more progressive artists that play bebop or cool jazz. But modern jazz wasn't fully embedded in the American mainstream yet, let alone in Hollywood filmmaking. The film, then, portrays the interracial All-Stars in a fairly unproblematic fashion possibly due to their belonging to a well-worn musical style that white audiences were used to. White demographics were no less familiar with Armstrong, who had already entertained with his flamboyant showmanship for three decades. The clownish yet talented trumpeter always performed in a stereotyped manner that connoted otherness and reminded whites of their privilege. With his All-Stars, Satchmo birthed a revival of Dixieland in the immediate postwar years, a resurgence the film industry welcomed with open arms. In *The Strip*, Armstrong performs no different from how he performed in his prior movie appearances. Grinning, dancing and eye-bulging, Satchmo interacts both with his bandmates and white audience members over the course of his musical numbers. Similarly, the film also stresses the reactionary applause and praises of the white clientele. Armstrong's band plays a handful of Dixieland classics, including "Shadrack," "Basin City Blues," "Ole Miss," and "When the Saints go Marching In." Perhaps most interesting in the group, particularly in terms of context, career and representation, is the pioneering jazz pianist Earl 'Fatha' Hines. A traditionalist turned modernist, Hines went from playing Dixieland with Armstrong in the '20s to developing bebop with Gillespie and Parker in the '40s. The versatile pianist took the young boppers under his wings and made significant contributions to the formation of the bebop sound. In fact, Hines is often credited with being the first modern piano player, referred to as the 'Fatha of Modern Jazz Piano.' In 1948, a few years short of filming *The Strip*, Hines reunited with Armstrong in the All-Stars band. The pianist occupied a liminal position between the entertaining commercialism of Dixieland/swing and the artistic experimentation of the modern jazz revolution. Hines himself remarked: "I want to reach young and old. You play Dixieland, you get the old and drive away the young. You play modern, you get the young and keep away the old" (in Balliett 2005: 93). Douglas K. Ramsey suggests that Hines exercised different facial postures depending on the performative occasion. Either "he smiles engagingly," or he "is in full cry, eyes closed, head back, grimacing in intellectual



strain and the ecstasy of creation” (1989: 15). Not dissimilar from Satchmo, Hines tended to smile widely when attacking his piano keys. He was nicknamed ‘Gatemouth’ because his wide smiles exposed teeth that were white like the pearly gates. In *The Strip*, his second and final movie appearance, Hines plays with the happy-go-lucky showmanship that characterizes many of his performances and most Dixieland musicians in general. Interestingly, however, the pianist is the only member of the All-Stars who is positioned with his back towards the audience. This was a modern thing to do, a conscious strategy employed by boppers and cool artists, and most famously by Miles Davis, to revolt against the gimmicky audience interaction of traditional jazz. Hines nonetheless turns his head to recognize the crowd from time to time, evident in his brief solo during their rendition of “Ole Miss.” His solos were, as Gunther Schuller writes, “usually brief, unspecial, and at times even meandering” (1989: 284). These intricate turns, along with his everlasting smiles, epitomize his Dixieland upbringing and desire to acknowledge his spectators. Hines admitted that his smiles reached its widest posture when he was spontaneously experimenting with alternative harmonies on the keyboard: “The audience never knows, but that’s when I smile the most, when I show the most ivory” (in Balliett 2005: 93). The act of smiling, then, becomes a public mask designed to conceal the deep concentration that goes into his artistic improvisation. Conversely, Hines later stated, in what sounds like complete self-contradiction, that individual artistry surmounts crowd satisfaction: “Never look at the audience or tell it what they’re playing or smile or bow or be all gracious. Just toot-toot-a-toot and look dead while the other guy is playing and get off” (ibid: 99). This comment surely reflects the influence of modern jazz aesthetics and adds complexity to the unpredictable mentality of the innovative piano artist. In the film, Hines nevertheless maintains a greater interest in motivating his bandmates than in recognizing his white audience, partly encouraged by his unconventional stage positioning. As Ramsey asserts, “he shows unflagging and apparently genuine interest in the efforts of his sidemen” (1989: 15).



12. The 'Fatha' of Modern Jazz Piano: a grinning Earl Hines in *The Strip* (1951).

Armstrong's All-Stars is fairly disconnected from the noir narrative and their inclusion in the film capitalizes in the white popularity of Dixieland jazz. His sextet epitomizes what Lenard Feather calls 'canned' performance, providing auxiliary musical intervals separated from the advancement of theme and storyline. As Gabbard notes, "Armstrong and a band of canonized jazz greats are taken for granted and frequently ignored throughout the movie" (1996: 223). But the film still utilizes the nightclub as its main setting and music as the primary occupation for its protagonist, making their presence slightly more intelligible. *The Strip* stars Mickey Rooney as Stan Maxton, a war vet and talented drummer, who becomes prime suspect in the shootings of gangster Sonny Johnson (James Craig) and his girlfriend Jane Tafford (Sally Forrest). After the shootings, Stan tells his story in flashback narration to a police detective. Working for Sonny's insurance company, Stan is offered the drummer position in Armstrong's band at a nightclub called Fluff's Dixieland. The only problem, of course, is that Stan already holds a lucrative insurance job where he makes way more "dough" than he would in the nightclub business. Stan tells Fluff, the nightclub owner

who offered him the job, that “I make triple what I could make in the band business.” Fluff tempts him with the prospect of working with the likes of Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines, but Stan isn’t convinced: “They’re real wonderful. They’re the greatest cats in the world, but no thanks.” Stan isn’t fuzzed by the idea of working with Armstrong and his band. In fact, money is more important for him at this point so that he one day can afford to open his own jazzclub. Which leads us to the premise for the story: economic wealth versus personal integrity. Indeed, Armstrong’s introductory rendition of “Shadrack,” a song about three disciples refusing to worship their king, anticipates Stan’s dilemma. Stan is restrained by Sonny, his superior boss, who condemns Stan’s new job offer by conforming to dominant assumptions of jazz: “you came here to beat your brains out with a lot of slap-happy jive men.” This is not the first time that dialogue explicitly adheres to prevailing myths and stereotypes about jazz in film noir. In *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), William Bendix’s character infamously refers to jazz as “monkey music.” The already established unlikability for both of these characters, however, immediately denounces their derogatory remarks and turns attention to the narrowmindedness intrinsic in such racialized generalizations. Stan nevertheless resists Sonny’s perception by taking the job in Armstrong’s band. He takes the job not because he wants to play jazz with them, however, but to be closer to a female dancer who works at Fluff’s. Jane Tafford is the dancer and love interest who convinces him to accept the job offer. Or at least Stan thinks she is his lover. Sally merely exploits him for his connections in the film industry, selfishly fueling her own showbiz ambitions. When Stan returns to Fluff’s after Sally’s death, Armstrong’s All-Stars immediately switch from “A Kiss to Build a Dream On,” the song which the protagonist associates with his dead lover, to an unrecognizable and stridently faster composition with more musical dissonance. The aggression of Stan’s drum solos, also overdubbed by Cozy Cole, punctuates the hopelessness and frustration that burden the protagonist, for not to mention the violent beating of him. While the ghosting of Stover’s introductory drumbeats simply disguises the skills of a black artist, Cole musically scores the inner turmoil of Rooney’s desolated protagonist. Cole composes a rhythmically accelerating, bop-inflected soundtrack for Stan’s onscreen drum solos, incorporating modern jazz to underpin the character’s spontaneous life in the fast lane. As Hines did, Cole also worked with Gillespie and Parker in the ‘40s and was renowned for bridging the gap between swing and bebop. Hines and Cole were, in addition to Coleman Hawkins, three in a handful of old school jazzmen that not only embraced but also mastered the techniques of modern jazz (DeVeaux 1997: 169). Danny Barker writes: “It was an interesting thing

to see Cozy's serious drum-technics. He was doing flamadiddles, explosions, and rimshots that Klook-a-mop (Kenny Clarke) was doing: bop-be-bop!" (in Shipton 1986: 165). Ironically, it here required a white actor to visually solidify an African-American musical articulation. Upon release, Cole received no credit for the ghosting of Rooney's drum solos, following on from the trend set in *Blues in the Night* (1941) with the case of Snooky Young and Jack Carson. Released two months later, *The Big Night* (1951) features an unidentified black drummer that pursues a bop-oriented solo, this time strikingly linked to prior deeds of violence and murder. Both films briefly employ black music to convey varying states of anxiety in the white imagination, yet forestall the induction of bebop in Hollywood filmmaking. In the All-Stars' final performance, Armstrong and Hines wipe off their grins as they look sympathetically at Stan/Cole, who embarks on the roughshod drum attack that brusquely ends the picture. *The Strip* nevertheless depicts jazz as a noticeably more positive force than many of the film noirs that preceded it. It tells us that playing jazz is a job profession that can be a genuine way of making a living and that encourages friendship beyond racial restrictions, not often seen in films from this time.

# Chapter 3

## I'd Rather Have the Blues: The Singers & Songs of Film Noir (1949-1955)

Roughly overlapping with the preceding chapter, this chapter primarily explores representations of female blues singers and their functions within the worlds of classical film noir. I discuss the capacity of the blues, both lyrically, vocally and spatially, to comment and reflect upon narrative themes and the psychological states of noir protagonists. My overall principle is that film noir diverges from the more customary 'sexualized' constructions of black singers in golden age cinema by allowing blues chanteuses the opportunity to appear at significant moments in the storylines to provide moments of relief and consolation for debilitated and existential male antiheroes. In this fashion, the blues invariably offers atmospheric counterpoints to the murky and ominous moods that characteristically haunt the narratives of film noir. I contend that black female songstresses, who were granted severely limited opportunities in the Hollywood film industry, draw on the intuitive and intellectual currency of the blues to comment on narrative developments and specific character conditions. This allows for black songstresses to subtly transgress the creative restrictions that were imposed on black women in mainstream pictures during the pre-civil rights era. Yet the singers are occasionally also, as black female characters generally were in classical Hollywood cinema, objects of a dominant and nondiscursive male gaze, most evident in my analysis of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). On the one hand, this voyeurism undermines them to state of sexual objectification. On the other hand, this gaze, which is frequently returned by the black singers themselves, making it more of a looking relation, enables certain nightclub sequences to deftly transcend the taboos and boundaries attached to the ideas of miscegenation and intersexual contact. Also examined in this chapter is Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), a picture that, unlike the other films discussed here, features a male blues singer in the form of Nat King Cole. I analyze the contradictory and uneasy ways in which Cole is both othered and humanized in a stridently exoticized nightclub landscape and why his performance in the film is disturbingly

difficult to make sense of. Before I turn to film analysis, I provide historical contexts for the blues both as musical genre and sexual construct, contexts that will help us deepen our understanding as to why the blues sustains such a rich and prevailing presence in classical film noir.

Stemming from the rural south in the late nineteenth century, the blues has roots in traditional African-American spirituals and work songs. More than any other jazz idiom, the blues relies strongly on and imparts great power from its lyrical content. The term itself describes a depressed mood, reflecting the long-lasting struggles of oppression and discrimination that blacks have endured on American soil. Some of the most prominent blues artists were female vocalists, such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, whose lyrics frequently addressed multiple levels of subjugation from social, racial, and gendered perspectives. To understand the deeply layered qualities of the blues, one would often have to read between the lines. “The mysteriousness of the blues,” Ralph Ellison writes, lies in “their ability to imply far more than they state outright, and their capacity to make the details of sex convey meanings which touch upon the metaphysical” (in Callahan 2003: 276-7). It is their obliquely metaphorical language that lends black female blues chanteuses the opportunity to comment, if not on their own obstacles, on the thoughts and tragedies of male noir antiheroes. In fact, the depressed mood of the blues resonated with the themes of film noir, allowing blueswomen to consistently appear in many noirs throughout the original cycle. Film noir displaces the original objectives of the blues, which were to comment on black racial struggles, for its own ingenious purposes. Black female performers, who were otherwise granted severely limited influence in the motion picture industry, enable through their blues to reflect upon the inner turmoil of noir protagonists and even foreshadow narrative events. Male antiheroes appear to identify with the blues singers, perhaps because both groups occupy positions as social outsiders in their respective worlds. Thus, as I demonstrate in this chapter, black female vocalists practice rare privileges in film noir that could have remained unfulfilled had it not been for the intellectual influence of the blues. As Angela Davis concurs, the distinctiveness of the blues lies in its “intellectual independence and representational freedom” (1999: 3). Davis continues: “Considering the stringent taboos on representations of sexuality that characterized most dominant discourses of the time, the blues constitute a privileged discursive site” (1999: xvii). As far as noir is concerned, this discourse encompasses not only the transcendence of narrative influence but also the capacity to transgress taboos attached to interracial sexuality. Some of the gestural and looking

relational interactions that take place between white male protagonists and black blues singers can be said to delicately exceed the postwar norms for miscegenistic contact. As Hazel Carby writes:

Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual objects (in O'Meally 1998: 473).

But blueswomen struggled to evade the free-floating gaze of sexual objectification. Female singers were often labeled 'canaries,' both by musicians and audiences alike, for their inadvertent tendency to please the eyes rather than the ears of male nightclub occupants. For Joel Dinerstein, the canary "looks rather than sounds good" (2017: 198). Madi Comfort in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and Hazel Scott in *Le Désordre et la Nuit* (1958) are prime examples of canaries in film noir. Comfort merely mimes to the pre-recorded vocals of another artist and offers a racialized sexuality to the white male protagonist. In *Le Désordre et la Nuit*, a French noir directed by Gilles Grangier and starring Jean Gabin in the leading role, Hazel Scott plays a nightclub singer who on several occasions becomes the object of an overriding white male gaze. Hazel, who had voiced ongoing contempt for Hollywood's mystification of black women and who had become blacklisted by the HUAC for her communist affiliations, exiled to Paris in pursuit of singing and acting jobs offering more representational autonomy. But during production of the film, "Hazel remembered her old days in Hollywood," seeing "little difference in the way things were done in France" (Chilton 2010: 177). In the film, Hazel performs in a swanky interracial Parisian nightclub, seductively dancing among seated white male patrons that voyeur her with bewildering pleasure. The sexualization of her performance in *Le Désordre et la Nuit*, which is accessed from white male point of view, buttresses Bill Reed's remark that "the French, it appears, were no better at utilizing her talents than the Americans" (2010: 105). Despite "refusing to be constructed as spectacle," Charlene Regester registers that "Scott had only limited control over how she was depicted on screen" (2010: 215-16). Ann duCille perceptively asks whether the blues singers did "objectify, exoticize, and eroticize the female body" themselves or whether "the moment created and exploited them" with these practices of promiscuity (1993: 74). By "the moment," duCille refers to the dominant culture industry of the early to mid-20th century which she argues exploited and mythologized black female singers. In our case, this "moment" implies golden age cinema and, as this chapter indicates, white filmmakers certainly had more control over the ways in which blues singers were

depicted on film than the singers had themselves. As Kelly Brown Douglas suggests, blueswomen were victims of a cynical “white cultural hypersexualization of them” (Ellison & Douglas 2010: 61). Modern film studies has heavily documented the white male gaze and its fetishist observations of the white female body. Yet there is limited study on the moments when this gaze slips over to ‘forbidden fruits.’ As bell hooks writes: “Since feminist film criticism was initially rooted in a women’s liberation movement informed by racist practices, it did not open the discursive terrain and make it more inclusive” (1992: 125). On the occasions that the white male lead comes across a black female singer, he contemplates her from a perspective of that of, say, James Stewart in *Vertigo* (1958). But the discriminatory effect is doubled. White men inevitably enter these exchanges with a double advantage in that their racial and gendered identities grant them a dual privilege. The power of this gaze, which the camera prioritizes, is therefore heightened. Interracial looking relations expand on the ‘prohibited’ sexual fantasies of white males at the expense of objectifying the black female. Writing on representations of jazz and blueswomen in classical Hollywood cinema, Kristin McGee asserts: “Their filmed performances inevitably facilitated a male gaze that transgressed racial boundaries and fetishized miscegenistic fantasies ... women became the object of a nondiscursive, yet highly racialized male psyche” (2009: 167). African-American blues singers, then, certainly occupied a multifaceted existence, whether on or off camera. On the one hand, they exhibited the intellectual intuition necessary to reflect upon character states, narrative themes, and social conditions. On the other, they were concurrent products of an owning male gaze and victims of racially charged environments. In film noir, blueswomen employ coded and subversive strategies to chart and reflect the inner existentialism of white antiheroes, although their nightclub performances still sometimes encourage complex and racialized male appreciations.

### 3.1 *The Glass Key*

The birth of the noir blues, so to speak, occurs in a shady basement club in Stuart Heisler’s *The Glass Key* (1942). Eminent for its raw and graphical portrayal of physical violence, this Paramount movie is particularly noteworthy for the overtones of homoerotic sadomasochism inherent in the hostile relationship between protagonist Ed (Alan Ladd) and antagonist Jeff (William Bendix). Halfway through the film, Jeff savagely beats up Ed, punching him onto a bed and eerily calling him with such tags as “sweetheart,” “sweetie pie,” and “baby.” In the words of Phil Hardy, “Bendix gets significant pleasure from touching and beating Alan Ladd in *The Glass Key*” (1998: 173). The



blues, nonetheless, serves both as a sonic compensation for and thematic companion to this subversive violence. Following his solid thrashing of Ladd's character, Jeff calms himself down with a drink to the soft piano blues of Lillian Randolph, who today is best known for voicing the character of Mammy Two Shoes in the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. Interpreting Jule Styne's and Frank Loesser's "I Don't Want to Walk Without You," while simultaneously looking straight into Jeff's eyes, Randolph subtly delineates his twisted emotions for Ed: "Walk without my arm about you, baby. I thought the day you left me behind, I'd take a stroll and get you right off my mind." Jeff, who stands right in front of Randolph's piano, gazes compellingly at the blueswoman, as if her sentimental lyricism is somewhat relatable to his own yearnings and desires. Her singing of 'baby' evokes Jeff's usage of the word just a few scenes prior. Her line "the day you left me behind," similarly, echoes Ed's recent escape from Jeff's captivity. In the moment of her delivery of "Oh baby, please come back," Ed slowly emerges down the stairs of the Basement Club, looking vengefully into the eyes of his enemy. The protagonist has come back to retaliate on his physical offender. While Randolph's blues is evidently linked to the antagonist's sheer recklessness, it also comments imaginatively on the narrative development and underprops Jeff's inner turmoil and emotions. Interestingly, Randolph's musical profundity was not integrated into the script, implying a later improvisation of her sensuous rendition. Jonathan Latimer's shooting script, dated February 14, 1942, describes the musical performer and her surroundings slightly different: "A colored girl is playing boogie-woogie music on the piano, singing softly. Four or five men are grouped around her" (1942: 115). First, Randolph is not a "colored girl" but a shapely 40-year-old lady. Second, multiple men are not grouped around her, only Jeff and another unidentified white woman. Rather than sketching intuitive blues, then, Latimer's script provokes sexualized imagery of a black girl surrounded by gazing white men, imagery which is evocative of the more usual ways Hollywood objectified and mystified black female sexuality onscreen at the time. Thankfully the sequence was changed for the better in its visual execution and set the stage for blueswomen to continue to symbolically and intuitively influence the narratives and themes of film noir.



13. “Oh Baby, Please Come Back:” Lillian Randolph singing the blues to William Bendix in *The Glass Key* (1942).

### 3.2 *House of Strangers*

In Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *House of Strangers* (1949), piano singer Dolores Parker performs a trio of songs that chart the declining relationship of protagonists Max Monetti (Richard Conte) and Irene Bennett (Susan Hayward). Parker was, upon her casting in the film, a popular blueswoman with wide experience from her work in the orchestras of Fletcher Henderson, Earl Hines and Duke Ellington throughout the ‘40s. She was also, until her death in 2018 at 99 years of age, the last surviving vocalist that worked in Ellington’s orchestra. Defined by *Jet Magazine* as “an attractive, quietly sophisticated singer,” Parker ironically described herself as “singing the right songs in the wrong places” (in Johnson 1952: 62). In *House of Strangers*, however, she sings the right songs in the right place. Her musical performance sensitively tracks the deteriorating couple from their initial attempt at reconciliation to their ultimate decision to go separate ways. Set in New York’s Little Italy, the speakeasy bar sequence opens with a close-up of Parker, before the camera

withdraws to the point of view of the depressed lovers. Max and Irene miserably watch the talented singer now occupying the distant background. But we hear her songs clear as ever. Parker's three songs musically graph the downward curve of their relationship. Her first song, "Can't We Talk It Over," reflects the little bit of hope that's still left in their already befuddling romance. As Parker performs her second piece, "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone," they are realizing that their relationship is going absolutely nowhere. With a fatal mix of honesty and irony, Irene laments: "Enjoy yourself. It's our last night, so have fun." Her third and final song, "Was That the Human Thing to Do," carries the inhumanity with which they have treated each other so far. The composition equally triggers a stronger reflection on their decision: was it human of us to end our relationship so rapidly? In this sense, Parker not only sings us a good question but musically anticipates the end of the story. For Max and Irene ultimately make the effort to try and live together in harmony. Parker's lyrics were, as one might expect, not outlined in Philip Yordan's shooting script. But Yordan still communicates veneration for the blues by offering a remarkably detailed plan for the mood that the music should bring to the melancholy atmosphere of the speakeasy sequence. Yordan's screenplay, dated December 20, 1948, elaborates an enriching and nonsexual description of the blues unusual for black music at script level:

INT. SPEAKEASY - NIGHT

... A colored girl is softly playing the piano. Every once in a while she sings a line or two of lyrics of the song she plays in a low, throbbing voice ... The music throbs over scene, cutting under the skin ... Few speak. An almost uncanny silence pervades, unbroken by the music, which seems a part of it (1948: 68-9).

Despite including a conventional racial label, Yordan paints a picture of a black female artist and her musical meanings that is astonishingly generous for a 1940s Hollywood screenplay. Surely Yordan's script enunciates more sympathy and admiration for the blues than Latimer's script to *The Glass Key* did, though both of the screened versions utilize black music in imaginative ways that deviate from the customary sexualization of black singers in golden age cinema. In *House of Strangers*, Parker's blues both melodically and lyrically cut under the skin of the two protagonists. Through her throbbing voice and disillusioned lyrics, she becomes imperative to the estranged couple's destructive silence. Indeed, Mankiewicz's filmed sequence here partially evokes Gary Carey's proposition that "a properly written screenplay has in effect already been directed" (in

Dauth 2008: 89). As they leave the bar, Max informs the bartender that “you got a nice place here, lots of atmosphere.” Sarcastic or not, he decides to return to the same Little Italy bar the next day. Max glances over at the piano, curiously looking for Dolores Parker who is no longer there. He somewhat surprisingly asks the bartender about her whereabouts. The immediacy of his question suggests, at a very minimum, that the primary reason for his revisit to the speakeasy is the mellow blues that he remembered from last night. While Parker underscores Max’s gradual detachment from Irene, then, the black singer simultaneously attracts the white male protagonist, who has been betrayed by his mafioso driven family, closer to herself. Max takes position by the piano and starts playing, a position previously held by Parker that overlaps his outcasted existence with that of the peripheral female blues artist.



14. "Can't We Talk It Over:" Dolores Parker singing the blues in *House of Strangers* (1949).

### 3.3 *They Live By Night*

In the Nicholas Ray films *They Live By Night* (1949) and *In a Lonely Place* (1950), jazz and blues offer refuge and solace for publicly pursued protagonists. In the former, a fugitive couple finds

brief sanctuary in a jazzclub on the French Quarter of New Orleans. Bowie (Farley Granger), an escaped prisoner falsely convicted of murder, has just robbed a bank to afford a lawyer that can prove his innocence (so much for noir irony). Bowie befriends and marries Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell), niece of fellow bank robber Chickamaw, whom he plans to live an honest life with. Though merely a repressed accomplice to a criminal gang, Bowie is incorrectly described as a gang leader named "Bowie The Kid" in the newspapers. Their nightclub visitation, which oddly enough plays out in broad daylight, represents slight relief for the neurotic couple who are tired of running from the law. Bowie and Keechie drink cocktails at their table, watching white patrons dance to the jazz number of a black band, which features the New Orleans musicians Billy Hadnott (bass), Elmer Fane (clarinet/sax), Hosea Sapp (trumpet), and Vic Dickenson (trombone).



15. A glittery Marie Bryant in *They Live By Night* (1949).

As true outsiders, they don't understand why people would want to dance: "I think it's silly switchin' around like that, gettin' all hed up." Isolating the protagonists from the remaining clientele, their disdain for dancing also inadvertently scrutinizes the interactive swing era which

by the late '40s was expiring (though swing was still very much alive in film noir). Nerve-wrecked as they are, they keep reassuringly asking each other if they are having a good time. The band then initiates a blues number, patrons find their seats, and Marie Bryant picks up the microphone. She offers her interpretation of Gene de Paul's and Don Raye's "That's Your Red Wagon," a title that in New Orleans slang means that's your business. Departing the bandstand, Bryant playfully penetrates the audience space and collects tips from seemingly amused white patrons. Though female occupants are present, Bryant's apparent focus is on establishing coquettish physiognomic exchanges with white male audience members. And the men look more than happy to tip her. In this sense, the dancing singer utilizes her black sexuality, which is mysteriously interesting in the white imagination, to earn her keep. Bryant was a popular dancer at the time, and someone Hollywood executives would often ask for, probably because her lighter complexion and extroverted sexy style appealed to white demographics. She was considered "one of the most vivacious black dancers in the United States" (Smith 1996: 71). Bryant was criticized, however, for dancing like only blacks could, practicing "the art of the striptease" to make money. But she became well known for inventing the style of "controlled release." The lively dancer insisted that she consciously controlled her popularized movements even as she profited from them:

I've built a dancing style of my own that can be best described as 'controlled release.' This consists in finding the natural line in each body and the favorite ways it likes to move about – then controlling these movements ... My dancing is described by some as the kind of dancing 'only Negroes can do because it's sexy and kind of lowdown.' But that isn't so. My work is controlled and artfully routined and within this framework I dance the popular movements people pay to see (in Bogle 2006: 241-2).

Although Bryant's performance in *They Live By Night* accentuates certain racialized and sexualized associations, partly encouraged by the setting and camera work, her dancing is simultaneously refined and carefully composed. Her frisky movements, while exuding hints of seduction and flirtation, are never exaggerated and are always contained within her style. The singer-dancer discharges a level of coquetry that is possible without running the risk of degenerating her own sexuality. Wearing a glittery yet covering dress, Bryant confidently and elegantly dances herself through the nightclub. To be sure, she is not nearly as objectified as Madi Comfort is in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) or as Hazel Scott is in *Le Désordre et la Nuit* (1958). Her

daring number further predicates how “Marie was always equally at home with black and white people” (ibid: 242). Bryant even possesses intuitive insights into the anxious instabilities of the white protagonists. Her rendition of “That’s Your Red Wagon” comments discursively on the disintegrating journey of the couple. The moral of the song is that prior to one’s life decisions one should consider their immediate and distant consequences. Nobody else can fix your problems. Ultimately, your problem is your red wagon; your own business. Bowie is persuading Keechie they should escape to Mexico when Bryant, much to his unpleasant surprise, dancingly arrives at their table. Looking flirtatiously yet deeply into Bowie’s eyes, she warns him against the lawless life:

You get burnt when you play with fire

Don’t come runnin’ to me

You can’t use me for your spare tire

If you don’t have love songs to fit my key

Baby, don’t sing your blues to me

That’s your red wagon, that’s your red wagon

Bowie smiles back at the singer, but the smile looks forced: he is clearly discomforted by her intimacy and underestimates the intuitive wisdom of her lyrics. He is wedged by the frolicsome yet slightly trespassing nature of her performative movements. Bryant’s eloquent life lesson addressed to the couple is thus obscured behind more accessible reasoning for standing at their table: she is hustling for tips. When Granger’s character eventually tips her, she instantly dances over to the next table. By italicizing an all-white clientele openly enjoying and even tipping black musicians, Ray inevitably celebrates the alleged liberal generosity of whiteness. The fact that the donating patrons are males and the singer/dancer is female further carries gendered implications. Subsequently, a drunk man clashes into their table. Bowie, paranoid as every fugitive should be, thinks they are ambushed and instinctively attacks the sozzled fellow. Bryant intermits her performance, grabbing Bowie and downplaying the situation: “No trouble, boy.” But the nightclub represents no longer a safe place for the protagonists. Another patron recognizes Bowie and informs him “you’ve got about an hour, maybe less, to get out of town.” The sequence culminates

in a glitzy shot of Bryant, suggestively watching the couple's exit, flashing her newly acquired tips and scatting herself through the outro of the song: "Just keep draggin, just keep draggin." They leave the nightclub and drag their red wagon along. For David Butler, the casting of Bryant "demonstrates the couple's status as outsiders. Bowie and Keechie have even less power and control over their lives than the black singer" (2002: 4). Marie Bryant's performance in *They Live By Night* is extraordinary because it exhibits certain spatial and thematic currencies that deviate from other representations of black female singers in golden age cinema. Although viewed from white perspective, Bryant is a confident woman who moves freely around the nightclub and whose lyrics reflect the inner workings of the protagonists. Similarly, the Vic Dickenson sextet remains one of few black bands in film noir that is not othered or displaying stereotypical flamboyant showmanship. These representations are partly thanks to the liberal mind of Nicholas Ray. The director loved jazz and was heavily involved in the music scene at New York's Café Society, one of America's first interracial jazz clubs. According to Patrick McGilligan, Ray and Bryant were in fact romantically involved during the production of *They Live By Night*: "Not for the first time, nor the last, did he allow his romantic pursuits to overlap and complicate his work" (2012: 122).

### 3.4 *In a Lonely Place*

Hadda Brooks, the blueswoman in Ray's next noir *In a Lonely Place* (1950), was also friends with the director and someone "Ray had enjoyed around town" (ibid: 185). In this celebrated Columbia noir, Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart) and Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame) similarly comprise a publicly pursued couple that finds brief consolation in the ubiquity of a black blueswoman. Dix, a short-tempered screenwriter accused for murder, falls in love with aspiring actress Laurel who becomes the only person standing by his side. This Ray vehicle is a dark melodrama where Dix's verbal hostility and lack of sympathy intensify his status as murder suspect. Tilted angles and dark shadows are consistently employed to complement the uneasy sense to which the protagonist is always followed, constantly under surveillance. The piano bar scene, however, is antithetical to the rest of the film in terms of tone and mood. In contrast to the picture's overall dark style, the scene is brightly lit and features mellow blues by keyboard kitten Hadda Brooks. Andrew Solt's revised shooting script, dated November 25, 1949, credits the music and the lighting for establishing the protagonists' temporary tranquility:

INT. CAFÉ – NIGHT



## MEDIUM-SHOT

In the foreground a copper-topped piano. Around it are Dix, Laurel and a few other people seated on high bar stools using the piano top as a table. At the piano an entertainer is singing. The music, the lighting, have put Dix and Laurel in a happy, mellow mood (1949: 80).



16. Shot-reverse-shot: Gloria Grahame, Humphrey Bogart, and Hadda Brooks in *In a Lonely Place* (1950).

Dix and Laurel sit opposite Brooks on a large piano table and are enjoying a tender moment. In the words of noir experts Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, “Bogart and Grahame experience a rare moment of safety and security” in this scene (in Silver & Ursini 1996: 71). African-American blues here establishes the safety and security that is absent elsewhere in the film. Which is not surprising taking Ray’s political orientation and musical taste into account. Ray was a left-winged liberal and member of the Communist Party but, unlike Joseph Losey and Abraham Polonsky, managed to evade blacklisting. The director was very fond of jazz and blues and developed friendships with both Marie Bryant and Hadda Brooks. Ray desired to shed positive light on the two blues artists. And it shows in *In a Lonely Place*. Brooks is credited, free from stereotypes and sings her song, “I Hadn’t Anyone ‘Till You,” in a dignified manner. The composition is in fact commenting on the amorousness of the two leading characters. As Dix and Laurel enjoy each other’s company, the song, which “is a song with both sophistication and a flavor of the past,” peacefully accompanies them (Wilder 1990: 427). Unlike Dolores Parker in *House of Strangers*

(1949), whose blues chart the decline of a relationship, Brooks nourishes the romance between *In a Lonely Place*'s two protagonists. The couple expresses admiration for the music by giving Brooks the more than occasional glance to which she also returns. Ray moderately intercuts between the singer and the couple, manifesting the indispensability of the blues to their blossoming ardor. This looking relation has been praised by several scholars. Dana Polan notes: "the close-ups given to black singer Hadda Brooks fit with the frequent concern in Ray's films to give attention to excluded groups and their forms of cultural expression" (1993: 54). Dan Flory, similarly, credits the Bogart character for that "he listens appreciatively to the African American piano singer, who metaphorically expresses his love for Laurel and hers for him" (in Spicer & Hanson 2013: 390). His appreciation for the blues is abruptly shattered, however, when Ted Barton, a stalking police detective, enters the piano bar. Dix realizes he remains under police surveillance and, in a second of instant exasperation, belligerently stubs his cigarette out on the piano. The blues is no longer pertinent to the protagonist, nor is the blues singer. Ray swiftly cuts to a reaction shot of Brooks who enunciates discontent on behalf of what she believes was an act of disrespect on Dix's part. Shook and surprised by Dix's sudden change of mood, the blueswoman looks disappointingly at him. But he doesn't look at her anymore and is getting ready to leave with Laurel. "In the moment of her reaction," Sean McCann argues, "Brooks turns dramatically from a background figure into a fully dimensional person whose subjectivity is displayed in her hurt realization of her insignificance to the people who surround her" (in Krutnik 2007: 128). Brooks' reaction shot, however brief, offers a glimpse of what it possibly feels for a racial and social outsider to be ignored by a more dominant world. Police surveillance dismantles Dix's safety and security in the piano bar and is reminiscent of how the drunk man ruins Bowie's refuge in the nightclub in *They Live By Night*. Similarly, both Bryant and Brooks respond with disenchantment to Bowie's and Dix's respective acts of aggression. The blueswomen know better than retorting to violence when life doesn't go their way. Interestingly, Dix's cigarette stub and Brooks' sensitive response was not detailed in Solt's revised script. In the screenplay, "Barton and a nice looking woman come in and sit down at the piano not far from Dix and Laurel" (1949: 80). In the film, the protagonists leave before the policeman gets a chance to sit down. Although the situation has become "tense and uneasy" and "the previous mood of happiness has been shattered," Solt suggests that "during all this, the Entertainer continues singing" (ibid). In other words, the script neglects the pianist's emotional sentiment and proposes her obliviousness to the dramatic atmospheric shift of the

sequence. Nevertheless, Bogart brought external authenticity to his character's fondness for the blues. The actor emitted deep reverence for the singer during production. Against her own will, Brooks was initially instructed to perform in the same "juiced-up" fashion that Bryant did in *They Live By Night*. But Ray didn't seem to understand that Brooks was not a flashy boogie-woogie dancer like Bryant was. "You can't make a Shirley Temple out of Judy Garland," Bogart objected, requesting Ray to "let her sing like she wants to sing it" (in McGilligan 2012: 185). There is naturalism to Bogart's contemplation of her musical number and can be considered an incident of, borrowing Kracauer's famous phrase, "nature caught in the act" (1997: 32). Similar to Robert Mitchum, Bogart is known for blending real personality with reel persona. Mike Chopra-Grant elaborates:

It is this coextensive quality of the actor's diegetic performances, and his extra-diegetic, transcendental performance of his star persona, which invests his screen roles with such a sense of realism and authenticity (2006: 165).

James Baldwin puts it blatantly: "One does not go to see Humphrey Bogart, as *Sam Spade*: one goes to see Sam Spade, as *Humphrey Bogart*" (2011: 28). There are undoubtedly elements of real world Bogart in *Lonely Place* Bogart. His compassion for African-Americans is also evident in other films of his such as *High Sierra* (1941), *Casablanca* (1942), *Knock on Any Door* (1949) and *The Harder They Fall* (1956). But authentic liberalism doesn't necessarily eliminate the weight that comes with his involuntary racial and gendered privileges. Similarly, as with many nightclub sequences in film noir, the mise-en-scene ultimately upholds the status of whiteness. The sequence opens with an establishing shot of the bar interior showcasing its all-white clientele. This is followed by a brief close-up of Brooks looking gently in Bogart's direction. Rather than staying on Brooks, which would more properly establish her number, Ray cuts to an enduring shot of the couple admiring the singer. In her later years, Brooks explained the reason for the cut was to disguise her struggle to synchronize with her own playback. This is, however, as Bernard Eisenschitz remarks, "much more of an editing problem than one of filming" and "does perhaps evoke a Ray much less sure of his margin of freedom for manoeuvre than he later became" (1993: 139). But the cut evokes racial implications too. By returning the attention to Dix and Laurel, their response to the music takes precedence over the music itself. This optic focus inevitably channels an unfortunate insistence on their white liberalism. Brooks becomes partly legitimized through the

focus on their reaction to her musical number and, by extension, owned by the white gaze. In this fashion, the blueswoman really hits the nail on the head when remarking that certain white audiences “wanted to be seen instead of listen, you know” (*Skip E. Lowe Looks at Hollywood* 1996). Yet there is little in the scene that prefigures Brooks as darker skinned. She has straight-combed hair and is so brightly lit that she looks almost caucasian. In effect, there is a worrying sense to which she acts so humanly that she has risen to the level of whiteness. Unlike the scripts to *The Glass Key*, *House of Strangers*, *The Big Night*, and *Kiss Me Deadly*, which all prearranged their female blues singers as “colored,” the *In a Lonely Place* screenplay provides no racial labels or signifiers. The piano player is merely described as “an entertainer” (Solt 1949: 80). To be sure, there is nothing stereotypically entertaining about Hadda Brooks in the film and she performs in a calm, sensuous, and nonsexual manner that seems emblematic of most female blues vocalists in classical film noir.

### 3.5 *The Big Night*

In the spring of 1951, English director Joseph Losey completed *The Big Night*, his last of five Hollywood films. Or, he almost completed it. Losey was finishing up the final editing touches when receiving the news that he had been named to the House Un-American Activities Committee, a right-winged organization tracking down individuals with communist sympathies. The radical director fled to Europe only a few days later. *The Big Night* came out in the fall that year and proved to be one of his weaker projects in America. It is, in fact, one of the celebrated filmmaker’s forgotten films. But the film still carries, as David Caute writes, “Losey moments” and “signs of Losey’s class” (1994: 95). In particular, the picture showcases a very compound nightclub sequence that historically abridges the ways in which male and female musicians are represented differently in film noir. *The Big Night* is a coming-of-age noir about George LaMain, a young drifter played by a nineteenth year old John Drew Barrymore, seeking revenge on the man who murdered his father. George witnessed his father’s murder, brutally committed by the cane of Al Judge (Howard St. John), a crooked sports columnist. The teenager embarks on a disorienting journey around downtown Los Angeles to track down his father’s killer. He stumbles upon a nightclub where he comes into contact with an African-American blues singer. Generally written off as an otherwise poor film, this scene is where Losey, in the eyes of several scholars, shows his directorial brilliance. Foster Hirsch writes: “The scenes in the prizefight arena and the nightclub - smoky, claustrophobic, darkly lit, crowded - are further evidence of Losey’s skillful integration of

characterization, setting, and theme: his fluent mise-en-scene” (1980: 52). But the fluency of his nightclub mise-en-scene also exhibits, as I show, certain racial implications. In the first phase of the sequence, George meets the sight and sound of a mixed-race quartet that plays swing and bebop. This is one of the first occasions when black and white musicians are openly performing together in a film noir nightclub. The unidentified quartet consists of what looks like two white musicians (trumpeter and saxophonist) and two black musicians (bass player and drummer). Given panchromatic film stock’s inability to accurately reproduce skin complexions, one cannot conclusively manifest the racial identities of the artists. All band members appear in the same semi close-up. This was taboo in Hollywood at the time. If one watches *Jammin’ the Blues* (1944) and *The Secret Fury* (1950), one notices that separate close-ups are required for different racial groups. It was controversial for interracial jazz combos to appear in the same collective close shot. *The Big Night* partly dodges this problem, however, by pushing the white musicians to the far edges of the moving image. Their facial features are, for the brief time the quartet is onscreen, only half-present and constantly in and out of frame. It is the drummer who forms the center of attention and serves a very specific narrative purpose. Sad from his father’s death and exhausted from zigzagging around downtown LA, George does not handle the drummer’s bop-inclined solo particularly well. George struggles to take his eyes off the sticksman who, rendered in chiaroscuro, takes the protagonist back to the vicious attack on his father. His noirish flashback is stylistically achieved through the superimposition of Al Judge’s cane attack over the image of the drummer’s accelerating drumbeats. This is a dangerous superimposition because it explicitly associates white noir malevolence with African-American rhythms. With reference to the drums, it adds to the misguided white fantasy of jazz, and specifically bop, as a primitive style of music. In fact, Losey’s particularized construction of a jazz drummer evokes Kerouac’s “On the Road” which mythologizes a drummer as “a big brutal Negro with a bullneck ... kicking his drums down the cellar and rolling the beat upstairs with his murderous sticks” (197). The drumsticks in *The Big Night* are indeed murderous. In noirs such as *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *D.O.A.* (1949), drum solos provoke the illicit sexual capacities of both male and female nightclub patrons. Here it generates, with a disconcerting racialized source, the characteristic anxiety of the white male antihero. Common for all these solos is that they, to quote Gareth Dylan Smith, “are also embodied by those people who hear and feel them” and are testimony to the “mysterious, intra-musical power in the rhythms that drummers create for their audiences” (2016: 102). In film noir, then, drum solos are

employed to harvest a level of anxiety and sexual immorality that would otherwise not have been permissible for the production code administration to be portrayed on film at this point in time.



17. Villain superimposed over a frantic drummer in *The Big Night* (1951).

Comparably direct (though less disturbing) parallels between jazz and physical violence are established in Robert Wise's *The Set-Up* (1949) and Joseph H. Lewis' *The Big Combo* (1955). In the former, the sounds of a jazz drummer and trumpeter, appearing only in silhouette, accompany the vicious assault on Robert Ryan's washed-out protagonist. Their racial identities are unknown, but they are certainly indexed, based on their silhouettes (which Julian Murphet would call "abstract racial entities") and the dubious narrative function of their music, as black (1998: 31). In the latter, a thunderous bebop drum solo is blasted into the ear of Cornel Wilde's protagonist as a means of torturing the character. The performing musicians are offscreen in both films and the association between black jazz and violence is therefore less suggestive than in *The Big Night*. Thus, it is prospective that the racially uncanny flashback effect in *The Big Night* was Losey's

invention. According to Colin Gardner, Losey was often “dislocating *noir* strategies, particularly through temporal anomalies within both narrative and mise-en-scene” (2004: 7). His films have a “tendency towards a cyclical temporality, where subjects and themes constantly re-emerge” (ibid: 214). For James Palmer and Michael Riley, Losey was “more involved in exploring elaborate settings or experimenting with cinematic time than in caring about his characters” (1993: 145). Thomas Elsaesser, similarly, notes how his characters are frequently “duplicating the situations they find themselves in by adding an additional mise-en-scene” (2005: 163-4). To be sure, Losey is more interested here in experimenting with cinematic time than in caring about George who frightfully duplicates the drummer’s drum attack with Al Judge’s fierce cane attack. Losey doesn’t care much for the drummer either who unwittingly transfigures into a re-emergence of the film’s main antagonist. Since temporal experimentation fell natural to Losey’s visual style, he might not have intended to reinforce any racist stereotype here, but that is the unfortunate implication. I was curious whether any perturbing correlation between jazz and violence was outlined in the shooting script. I therefore decided to view the screenplay at the British Film Institute where most of Losey’s material is archived. Stanley Ellin’s and Losey’s script suggest that upon entering the venue, which is called Club Domino, George meets the “deafening sound of bebop” (1951: 56). As opposed to the other band members, who are all playing swing, the drummer is in fact leaning towards bop. This representation is unusual because, as David Butler (2002) notes, bop was virtually absent from the original noir canon. Although swing was declining and bop was on the rise, Hollywood refused to keep up with the times. The style certainly represented more black resistance and intellectualism than the film industry was ready to accept. In order for the film to portray bebop, then, it needed to be “deafening” and associated with savagery. Ellin and Losey continue:

He raises his head slightly, looks through blurred eyes at the band. The band, FROM HIS ANGLE, is reaching the end of its final number. CAMERA MOVES IN CLOSER to the drummer and his image FADES into that of Al Judge’s cane smashing down. George’s head sinks down again; he can’t bear the sight (1951: 63-4).

The association between jazz/bop and physical brutality, here stridently established already at script level, is not only stereotypical but also immensely worrying. Their written description and visual portrayal of bebop are further testimony to the tendency that regardless which idiom of male jazz Hollywood represented, the same primitivist myths and stereotypes remained.

But it is very likely that Losey wrote this, even though he was a leftist liberal. Indeed, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the political orientation of a filmmaker may not necessarily better his representation of racial minorities. First, the visual effect is much in line with his overall visual style. Second, Losey contributed extensively to the writing process:

It wasn't terribly well written; although my signature is on it and I was more actively involved in the writing than I've ever been before or since - or want to be - this was again partly a question of blacklist. I do remember shooting the scene in the night club, which I was very pleased with (in Milne 1967: 93-6).

If Losey caused a racist slippage in the first phase of the sequence, he can be more pleased with its second phase. As the drummer finishes his solo, he is replaced by blues chanteuse Mauri Lynn. According to Jet Magazine, Lynn was Hollywood's replacement for Lena Horne and Hazel Scott who both left the racist and misogynist film industry for more lucrative nightclub commitments (Johnson 1952: 59). Fresh from her singing job in Jimmie Lunceford's orchestra, she was hailed by press agents and nightclub managers alike as the new Lena Horne. But she quickly experienced the movie business' discrimination towards and sexualization of black women: "Hollywood is not ready for Negro girls. I found that out soon. You can feel it when something's for you" (in Johnson 1953: 61). With that in mind, *The Big Night* still provides her a relatively freeing amount of screen time and lets her influence the narrative. Although labeled "Negro" and "colored singer" in the screenplay, Lynn musically salvages George from the paranoia of the jazz combo. Ellin's and Losey's script describes:

A spotlight goes on, hitting the bandstand as a woman, Negro, hair pulled up tight, topped with a white flower, comes to the 'mike' and immediately starts to sing a soft, sentimental number. George watches her dreamily, enraptured (1951: 64).

George enchantingly contemplates her vocal number which comments beautifully on the secluded existences of both the young outcasts. In her rendition of Lyn Murray's and Sid Kuller's "Am I Too Young," she carols: "I know I'm too old to be lonely, but am I too young to be loved? If love is really a blessing, then bless me and make it real." Losey sensitively cuts between the two individuals, establishing their affectionate looking relation, before closing in on the blues singer who completes her song in visual harmony without the interruption of audience reaction shots. They bump into each other on the sidewalk later that evening, after a night of heavy drinking on



his part. Lynn's sentimental lyricism is now set in motion. George, who is visibly under the influence, compliments her singing as they engage in a moment of thrilling eye flirtation. You simply do not see such insinuation towards the possibility of an interracial romance in other films from this era. This is the point when George, as requested in her lyrics, should bless her with his love. But love isn't always a blessing. Their enthralling moment together is abruptly obliterated as George's racial ignorance gets the better of him: "I think you're the most wonderful singer in the whole world. But that isn't all. Because also you're so beautiful, even if you are a-" He cuts himself off seeing the sudden disappointment in her eyes. She knows what he was about to say. Granted, he was going to compliment her beauty for being a black woman. "I didn't mean to say it," he apologetically pleads. But Lynn remains silent. The damage is done, even if his comment is verbally incomplete. She must have heard such racialized 'compliments' before, at least enough times to instinctively sense the untimely reprise of yet another one. The situation becomes the said of the unsaid; the unsaid is said by way of association and implication. As a consequence this potentially fruitful relationship is ruined: on a micro level by his clumsy social ignorance, on a macro level by the oppressive society of which they are both occupants.



18. Wounded: Mauri Lynn responding to George's racial comment in *The Big Night* (1951).

The source of ignorance in Losey's cinema has been decently discussed in film studies. Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, on the one hand, assert that social ignorance as projected by Losey's characters is a deliberate choice:

For Losey, a character's ignorance - which is to say, his lack of understanding of his own behavior - is a form of dramatic action because it is voluntary, a stubborn refusal to awaken. Ignorance is a *choice*. Many of Losey's films depict this stumbling and confused condition of characters who insist on compounding their ignorance rather than permit themselves to awaken to their social situation (2003: 218).

James Leahy, on the other hand, would consider George an exception to such an inclination. He argues that the boy is an ineluctable product of the oppressive society in which he lives. Leahy writes the following of his racial insult: "he does not intend to be cruel; society has so conditioned his attitudes that his unthinking remarks can be deeply hurting" (1967: 54). George's uttering is

painfully spontaneous and involuntary. It derives, in part, from his youthful inexperience and cultural upbringing, or even lack of upbringing. Leahy continues that it is his “needs to communicate,” or deficit on general human interaction, “that forces him into uttering the cruellest of remarks” (ibid). Losey himself concurs:

As for the cruel reaction of the boy towards the woman’s affection, I think people who are searching for parents are also searching for a very particular kind of love ... People who have been deprived for whatever reason, one way or another, are seeking the thing that they haven’t got. In my opinion, people who are searching that way - as I am - are to a certain extent incapable of either giving or receiving the thing they want. If you want love more than anything else in the world, it’s more than likely that when it’s given to you you don’t know how to receive it (in Ciment 1985: 123).

George’s comment originates from a complex array of loneliness, antisociability, and societal racial structures. Losey thus provides non-racial reasoning for the boy’s racially tinged comment. The introspective teenager receives from the singer attention that is unusual for him. George gets so caught up in the moment, forcing out the portentous remark. This is a boy who just viciously lost his father and holds no real people of intimacy in his life. His interaction with the blueswoman is both rare, precious and slightly uncomfortable, resulting in his failure to assemble the proper words to utter. James Palmer and Michael Riley note that Losey valued “understanding and compassion for human frailty and fallibility” in his films (1993: 15). Witnessing George’s trial in solitude and depression, one can understand why he says what he says, even if it is sometimes regrettably offensive. One sympathizes with his frailty and fallibility. Lending itself to the social problem film, the immediate aftermath further glimpses how a racial insult harms the victim in question. George’s pleas for forgiveness fall on deaf ears as the wounded singer leans on a lamppost in desolated, noir-poeticized solitude. As Tony Williams concurs, these images illustrate a woman who is “trapped within the bleak confines of an urban environment offering no real security but only loneliness and death” (in Silver & Ursini 2004: 102). In *The Big Night*, then, Losey constructs two contrastive representations of two black musicians that are both symptomatic, in their own individual ways, of how jazz is depicted in film noir. While the drummer is conventionally associated with crime and skullduggery, is Mauri Lynn fairly devoid of racialized

sexualization and impacts the narrative in similar fashion to how blues songstresses have done before her.

### 3.6 *Night Without Sleep*

Mauri Lynn reappears as another admired blues lady in Roy Ward Baker's *Night Without Sleep* (1952). In this 20th Century Fox noir, Lynn sings in a Harlem nightclub and is accompanied by Benny Carter and his Orchestra. Both Lynn and Carter were from Harlem, lending authenticity to their appearances in the film. *Night Without Sleep* is a low-budget B noir about a protagonist who is his own antagonist. Richard Morton (Gary Merrill), a musician himself, experiences blackouts and cannot always remember his past actions. One morning, he vaguely recalls the scream of a woman and a conversation with his wife Emily. Learning that his wife is missing, the unstable protagonist begins to wonder whether he had something to do with it. Morton sees various women throughout the film but one of them, Julie (Linda Darnell), he invites to a nightclub in New York's 'exotic' underground. "There's a little place in Harlem that I'm sure you've never been to," Morton rhetorically persuades. The implication being that a 'pure' white lady like Julie is unaccustomed to the African-American dense Harlem. The alluring cadence of his invitation adds mysticism to and links his internal demons to the perceived exoticism of the nightclub. It says something smaller about the larger perception film noir orients towards racial and ethnic others. Morton then goes out of his way to elaborate on Mauri Lynn: "Maybe I wasn't sufficiently eloquent about that little place in Harlem. This girl, she is the color of ripe coco. And she sings like heaven ought to be like." His appraisal of the black vocalist is delivered with such exhilaration that arguably carries racialized sexual undertones. Indeed, producer Robert Bassler revealed that Lynn got the part because she was a "beautiful cocoa colored girl with a voice that feels like feather brushing across your neck" (in Johnson 1952: 60). Such comments certainly expose the sexual and superficial premises for which black female singers were frequently cast in classical Hollywood pictures. Julie nonetheless accepts his invitation. Upon entering the Harlem club, they are escorted to their table by its black headwaiter. Reminiscent of Mitchum's elegant arrival at the Harlem jazz venue in *Out of the Past*, Morton is greeted by name and authoritatively penetrates the club all the way to its inner circle. As the headwaiter instructs his employee: "Clear 'em a table. Right away. Ringside." Unlike Tourneur's nightclub, however, this club holds both black and white patrons. In fact, the film possibly offers the first representation of a balanced mixed-race clientele in a film noir nightclub. To be sure, the contrast between the Harlem in *When Strangers Marry* (1944) and the

Harlem in *Night Without Sleep* is unmistakable. Additional white visitors here diminish the local exclusivity of Morton's whiteness and the alleged exoticism of the spot. The film distributes a 'racial balance' in a casual manner. On their way to their allocated table, Morton recognizes the bandleader on stage who is none other than the acclaimed multi-instrumentalist Benny Carter. Mastering both the trumpet and saxophone, Carter broke racial barriers in the early jazz age and frequently worked with white musicians. With his own orchestra, the versatile musician fronted the first interracial, multinational jazz band. Carter was neither no stranger to film noir, having titled one of his records "Key Largo" after the film of the same name. Although working within the style of big band swing, Carter did not perpetuate the stereotypical showmanship of Armstrong and Buckner. Gunther Schuller writes: "Carter was not the flamboyant 'entertainer' type ... Carter's trumpet playing is marked by lyric elegance and clean technique; in fact it is in a way too clean" (1989: 378-80). Lewis Erenberg concurs: "No glamour. No sex appeal. But a well-grounded musician" (1998: 79). Given his versatile and raceless background, it is only fitting that Carter orchestrates the diegetic music in *Night Without Sleep*'s interracial nightclub. "Look at me, boys," he instructs his onscreen orchestra, which includes Keg Johnson (trombone), Ben Webster (sax), Bumps Myers (sax), Gerald Wiggins (piano), and Charlie Drayton (bass).



19. Gary Merrill and Linda Darnell in a Harlem nightclub in *Night Without Sleep* (1952).

Carter walks over to properly greet Morton and their friendship probably derives from their shared occupation as musicians. While their exchange designates the protagonist's essential hipness, it also reflects Carter's external ability to transgress the racial restrictions of the times. Julie asks the trumpeter to perform "Too Late For Spring," one of Morton's very own compositions. In actuality, however, the standard is credited to Alfred Newman and Haven Gillespie, but its melody recycles Jimmy McHugh's "How Blue the Night." Mauri Lynn, the hyped-up blues chanteuse who sang in *The Big Night* a year before, emerges from the shadows and into the spotlight. Lynn is so brightly lit that she looks racially white, standing in stark contrast to the silhouettes of Carter's orchestra. Morton and Julie position themselves on the dance floor which is impenetrably and uttermost remarkably inhabited by both black and white couples. Evocative of the black jazz bands in *I Walk Alone* (1948) and *Cry Danger* (1951), Lynn and Carter's orchestra incite musical nostalgia and offer refreshing discontinuity from the darkness and deception that otherwise haunt the picture. But though they are having a good time, Lynn's song equally echoes Morton's malignancy and foreshadows his ultimate demise. It is *too late* for him to start a new romance with Julie, because he has in fact murdered his wife. He just doesn't know it yet. His past will soon catch up with him. Darker variations of the song haunt the protagonist later in the narrative, most notably when Julie comes knocking on his door, and he has to turn her down, because he is about to turn himself in to the police. Though *Night Without Sleep* is a largely neglected B noir, it inventively makes use of black performers, provides an early depiction of a racially diverse nightclub clientele, and hints towards the prospect of interracial companionship between black and white musicians. Maxwell Shane's *Nightmare* (1956) similarly centers around a white musician who suspects he might have committed murder and retorts to his black musician friends for help. Stan Grayson (Kevin McCarthy), a white jazz clarinetist living in New Orleans, has a nightmare about killing a man in a room full of mirrors. Stan is haunted by an odd melody that accompanied the nightmare but which he cannot identify. Driven crazy by the weird melody, Stan takes a trip around the bars and clubs of New Orleans to ask his musical colleagues for identification. In one cocktail bar, he asks boogie pianist Meade Lux Lewis if he is familiar with the melody, but he is not. Stan and Meade call each other by forename and it is implied that they have jammed together a many time before.



20. Buddies: Meade Lux Lewis and Kevin McCarthy in *Nightmare* (1956).

*Nightmare* is one of the first noirs to suggest interracial working relations within the jazz milieu and to feature jazz in its nondiegetic score. That aside, however, Shane's film otherwise looks and feels more like a '40s noir than like a film noir from the late '50s. Its diegetic nightclub music, for instance, is an outdated form of jazz, played by a stereotyped black musician, that one would not expect in a picture from the late noir era. Meade is, by comparison, provided significantly less visual courtesy than, say, boogie pianists Austin McCoy and Gene Rodgers are in *Decoy* (1946) and *Shoot to Kill* (1947) respectively, two film noirs from about ten years earlier. As Stan gets ready to leave the bar, he suddenly spots a beautiful blonde woman whom he remembers from the dream. Stan slowly approaches the woman with Meade consistently reinforced in a mirror hanging right behind her. Stan realizes she isn't the woman from his dream, but she is nonetheless attractive enough for him to pick her up. He praises Meade in his attempt to break the ice, glancing over at the pianist and calling him "the greatest." Meade Lux Lewis is certainly considered one of the greatest boogie-woogie styled pianists there ever was. According to Eric Kriss, Meade was one of the style's innovators and "transcended its original function as a dance music to becoming a listening music" (2014: 50). His boogie-woogie functions as a listening music in the film as well, which jazz generally does in '50s noir. His music plays through the whole sequence and underpins

the alcohol ingesting and escalating eroticism of the white paramours. In short, black jazz can here be said to serve as a signifier for alcoholism and sexual desire. As the woman rhetorically and indeed seductively asks Stan: “why don’t we just skip all the preliminaries?” Stan accompanies the woman to her topflight apartment. This is not the first time that jazz operates as a metaphor for sexual sultriness in film noir. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the link between jazz and sex in films such as *The Dark Corner* (1946) and *D.O.A.* (1949), but this connection is manifested even in pictures where black musicians do not appear on camera. In Stuart Heisler’s *Among the Living* (1941), a just offscreen swing band stimulates the sexual accessibility of white characters in a nightclub, a band that is racially indexed through the presence of cheeky black waiters. In Robert Siodmak’s *Phantom Lady* (1944), a frenzied drum solo in a basement joint facilitates an eroticized encounter between female protagonist Carol (Ella Raines) and jazz drummer Cliff (Elisha Cook Jr.). In John Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), jewelry robber Doc Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe) is preoccupied with a young woman dancing to a piece of big band jazz stemming from a jukebox. When her money runs out, Riedenschneider hands her more money to put into the jukebox so that he again can watch her dance to jazz music. In Lewis Allen’s *Appointment With Danger* (1951), listening to jazz records is the excuse for Al Goddard (Alan Ladd) to accompany Dodie (Jan Sterling), a jazz-fanatic girl, to her apartment. The sound of jazz becomes the instant greenlight for Goddard to voyeur Dodie’s bodily backside and for them to engage in a session of intimate dancing. In fact, the sequence also offers a rare occasion for bebop to make it into the dialogue in a film noir. Dodie asks Goddard: “You like bop?” He pretentiously replies: “Bop? Is that where everybody plays a different tune at the same time?” Goddard’s answer certainly reveals the common contemporaneous white perception that bebop is noisy and deafening. Dodie nevertheless admires bebop distinctively more than the male protagonist does. “You just haven’t heard enough of it,” she assuredly guarantees, further telling him to pay close attention to the “flatted fifth.” “Look, I wouldn’t know a flatted fifth even if they gave one away with every purchase,” Goddard promptly dismisses. The mention of the flatted fifth, indeed a bop harmonic invention, exposes some degree of familiarity with modern jazz and hints towards the late ‘50s when film noir would more actively incorporate bebop into its nightclub sequences and nondiegetic soundtracks.



### 3.7 *The Blue Gardenia*

A far more insistent lingering of song than in *Night Without Sleep* occurs in Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* (1953). Lang was, unlike Polonsky and Losey, not blacklisted by the HUAC, though there was a sense to which he was "grey-listed:" "not officially named by the HUAC committee, but not being employed either" (Gunning 2000: 390). Having directed a couple of highly successful film noirs in the '40s, Lang's Hollywood commitments would gradually decline the following decade, culminating in his exile back to Europe. *The Blue Gardenia* is not one of his most celebrated works. The picture is, perhaps, one of the film noirs that have become more remembered for their diegetic nightclub music than for their foregrounded narratives. Lang's film features none other than crossover superstar Nat King Cole in a 3-minute long musical seance that, on surface level, primarily displays his silk-smooth voice and capitalizes on his popular image. But, as I show, there is much more to his performance than that. At the time, Cole was one of few black musicians who, in the words of Daniel Epstein, had achieved a "cross over from the jazz race market to the world of popular culture" (1999: 128). His artistic style certainly owed more to white arrangers than to black jazz and bebop musicians. As the musical equivalent to Sidney Poitier, Cole's refinement resonated so highly with white demographics that they were ready to embrace his internalized whiteness. The lovable crooner had, to the contempt of many African-Americans, essentially risen to the cultivated standard of white culture. For Krin Gabbard, "Cole was the inverse of Presley – a restrained black man acting 'white' rather than a shameless white man acting 'black'" (1996: 246). Mina Yang, similarly, writes that he embodied "'whitewashed' music sung by a black musician in 'whiteface'" (2008: 94). His 'white' demeanor, externalized by his physically black complexion, complicates his presence in this film noir. Cole is in an uneasy conduct both juxtaposed with and implicated in *The Blue Gardenia*'s signature noir tropes. Lang's picture was photographed by Nicholas Musuraca, the same cinematographer who shot *Out of the Past* (1947) six years earlier, but the nightclub interior is very different and stridently more exotic here. The film follows the young woman Norah Larkin (Anne Baxter) who, after being discarded by her boyfriend, dates the womanizing rapist Harry Prebble (Raymond Burr). Prebble takes her to an oriental restaurant in Los Angeles, also called Blue Gardenia, that is plentiful of exotic markers. The venue is decorated in a Polynesian style, employs Asian waiters, features a blind flower seller, and supplies a mysterious drink called the Polynesian Pearl Diver. Placed at the bandstand of this strangely designed place is Nat King Cole who, according to Tom Gunning, is

“displayed as an exotic creature” (2000: 400). Rather than behaving exotic himself, however, is exoticism enforced onto him by his surroundings. His racial minority status thus makes him an easy target for othering and exotic implementation. Offering no establishing shot, the restaurant scene depicts Norah and Prebble having drinks at their table. This is followed by a cut to the bandstand where Cole, accompanied by jazz violinist Papa John Creach, plays the piano and croons the title track.



21. Nat King Cole eerily crooning the title song in *The Blue Gardenia* (1953).

On initial viewing, Cole looks slightly out-of-place in the film. His elegant finesse somewhat diverges itself from the illicitness that infiltrates the sequence in which he appears. Unlike other nightclub musicians in film noir, Cole never shares the same shot as the main protagonists. The sequence is awkwardly edited and it offers no establishing shot to physically proximate him in relation to the other characters within the nightclub. Cole essentially exists in a sphere separate

from that of the noir underworld. As Bosley Crowther, New York Times writer, remarked in his review of the film: “Happiest cast member, however, appears to be Nat (King) Cole. He sits at a piano and sings one run-through of the title song of the picture then goes home” (Crowther 1953). His geographic separation can, as Crowther insinuates in his review, be said to distance him from the film’s decadence and the cataclysmal relationship of its protagonists. For spectators accustomed to a tidy delivery of spatial unity between the elements within a mise-en-scene, however, this spatial incoherence unconsciously brings about a discomforting, unsatisfactory effect. On initial viewing, the sequence unsettled me: it looked mechanically erected, and I suspected that something was missing, but couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. After closer inspection, it became clear that the sequence was missing a conventional establishing shot, the type of introductory shot that we are all usually spoon-fed and take for granted. The lack of a proper interior establishing shot creates a visual discrepancy between Cole and the other nightclub patrons that, in conjunction with his curiously exotic bandstand, renders him otherworldly and uneasily alienated from the diegesis. The main signifier that suggests his physical nearness to the protagonists is his music, which works as a sound bridge between the racial counterparts in the scene. It is his song, which has the same name as the title of the film, that chiefly incriminates him in *The Blue Gardenia*’s themes of murder and rape. In fact, his rendition of the title track serves as an auditory precursor to a defining murder that changes the course of Lang’s film. But there are additional visual markers that both pinpoint Cole’s disconnection from and connection to the film’s focal action. Cole is harshly spotlighted, whitening him up and diminishing his authentically darker complexion. His bleached reproduction on screen corresponds with the sophisticated ‘white’ persona he was attributed in the popular imagination. In fact, there is a worrying tendency that the humanized performances of blues singers in film noir earn them the ‘privilege’ to be visually reproduced lighter. Nevertheless, his screen lightening, combined with his sophistication and spatial isolation from the diegesis, further disengages him from noir aesthetics and illegitimacies. The angling and sequencing of shots suggest that Cole looks and smiles gently in the couple’s direction. Cole’s optic focus fortifies the impression that his performance is designed to please a white audience. The fact that Norah and Prebble are the only visible nightclub patrons enhances the notion that the pianist plays exclusively to their service. But since he never shares a shot with them, we can’t be exactly sure what he is looking at. There is a large rectangular mirror hanging behind the musician that blatantly exposes his posteriors and piano tinkling. These are private

properties that, if it wasn't for the mirror, the close-up otherwise wouldn't capture. The mirror is definitely one of Lang's decorative contributions to the *mise-en-scene*. For Lotte Eisner, Lang's friend and biographer, the inclusion of the mirror elevates the shot to a "characteristic and ingenious shot" that characterizes the visual style of the director (1986: 323). Bridging German Expressionism with film noir, Lang frequently employed mirrors to suggest urban endlessness, create mazed paranoias, or sensationalize ambiguous identities. According to Robert Armour, "mirrors illustrate Lang's attention to detail and his awareness of means of making the set part of his statement on theme" (1978: 60). Joe McElhaney, similarly, notes how Lang utilized mirrors and other modes of image reflection to offer "vast and seemingly infinite architectural spaces containing trap doors and secret passageways." In turn, such reflections serve to "overwhelm the spectator with visual information" and, in Cole's case, add to his "lack of privacy" (2006: 53). I still wonder, however, what exactly went through Lang's mind when he decided to place a gigantic mirror behind Cole. In a revised page from the undated shooting script, supervised by Lang, it is suggested that the mirror merely serves the simultaneous display of Cole's face and fingerwork:

#### DIRECTOR'S PICKUP SHOTS

covering rendition of song by Nat Cole. His piano is in front of a mirror so tilted that we can see his entire piano action in it while his face is full in f.g. (Hoffman 27).

Though it seems the primary intention was to establish a concurrent showcase and 'unprivatize' the blues artist, there are heftier implications at stake. While awkwardly exposing the lack of synchronization between image and sound, the mirror also, as Gabbard writes, "adds to the strained exoticism of the *mise-en-scene*" (in Palmer & Pettey 2014: 111). It literally reflects Cole as a mysterious, dark, and othered presence. It further allows for Cole to be reproduced in two contradictory ways: black and white. His frontal appearance is illuminated by harsh overhead lighting, manipulating the genuineness of his actual skin hues. His mirror-reflected posteriors, however, and specifically the back of his head, is shadowed into *chiaroscuro*. If his front suggests otherwise, the mirror reminds us of his blackness. It hints towards a dark entity, racial or moral, lurking behind his spotlighted and indeed whitened front. The two conflicting illustrations together encompass a racially ambiguous identity, echoing his public image as a crossover artist who obscured the cultural lines of skin color. It is worth noting that the close-ups of Cole, as opposed to the rest of sequence, are in fact pickup shots. That is, they were filmed at a different time,

possibly in a different location, after the completion of principal photography. Surely, the pickup shots explain why Cole and the main characters are never seen together: the crooner was absent when Baxter and Burr acted out the scene. Either that, or, Lang deliberately aimed for Cole's spatial isolation to create an ingeniously perturbing effect which, for me, seems unlikely (though such an effect arguably remains intact). If Cole was available for filming on the chosen date, he would have been visually established in physical relation to the remainder of the nightclub mise-en-scene. As Janet Bergstrom remarks, "there is virtually nothing about Nat 'King' Cole's participation in either" of the archives where the production files for the film are stored (in Copjec 1993: 119). I, too, was unable to find any information about his participation in the production files located at the USC archives. His absence during production adds to his onscreen mysticism, while simultaneously removing his cultivation away from the actors' dramatized wickedness. He is, in a sense, both diegetically present and absent all at once. Following Cole's secluded close-ups, Musuraca cuts back to the dating couple. When Prebble orders them additional Polynesian Pearl Divers, Norah tries to stop him. But he merely hushes her while pointing towards the piano singer. As the undated script outlines: "Harry puts his finger to his mouth for silence and points at Cole" (Hoffman 27). Diegetic jazz, then, becomes the extra leeway Prebble needs in his pursuit of Norah's inebriation. Prebble and Cole briefly establish eye contact, but this is merely achieved through the sequencing of shots. Cole's melody contains the occasional sounds of downward progression chords, musically cuing the fall of the two characters. Gabbard asserts: "The song 'Blue Gardenia' becomes a sliding signifier, eventually moving towards connotations of murder and rape" (1996: 248). After making their way to Prebble's apartment, Prebble replays the song on his phonograph as he sexually advances on the drunk Norah. It is now those connotations become disconcertingly striking. In self-defense, Norah hits her physical offender with a fireplace poker. The hit turns into an act of murder which, significantly, is captured within a mirror duplication. Symbolically speaking, Cole's mirror-reflected blackness literalizes the murderous darkness captured in the mirror image of the dying Prebble. Undoubtedly, the consistent utilization of mirrors in the film works to create a greater sense of unease and anxiety. As Joe McElhaney remarks: "The descent of Nora into a night of drunkenness that culminates (or so she believes) in her murdering her date is marked by the repeated use of doors and mirrors" (2006: 53). Norah becomes a prime murder suspect and the song "Blue Gardenia" nondiegetically haunts the audio space nearly every time the murder is mentioned. When she is declared innocent and order is

restored, however, we never hear the song again. Norah is ultimately emancipated from the rueful mischief that the composition represents in the film. Nevertheless, Cole's visual and disturbingly artificial placement within the mise-en-scene is peculiarly difficult to make sense of. His refined stage mannerisms, high-key lighting, and independent spatial monopoly seem to suggest that he exists in a realm uncontained by the otherwise besmirched nightclub narrative. His haunting song, exoticized bandstand, and mirrored darkness, however, arguably tie Cole directly and uneasily to the themes and aesthetics of *The Blue Gardenia*'s unmistakable noirish sensibility.

### 3.8 *Kiss Me Deadly*

The blues of Nat King Cole resurfaces enthrallingly in Robert Aldrich's nuclear noir *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Cole does not physically appear himself, but his music delves less into the crime narrative than it interprets the extremities of cold war society. His song, "I'd Rather Have the Blues Than What I've Got," mediates the polarization from which American postwar culture suffers from. Aldrich, who served as assistant director on *Force of Evil* (1949), presents in this highpoint noir a loose critique of both communism and capitalism. Cole, rather than living in the diegesis, almost speaks to it from an external and cerebrally superior perspective. His composition lessons Mike Hammer, the white protagonist, about the greater good in life. Hammer, a tough private eye working on divorce cases, is pursuing a mysterious box called 'the great whatsit.' This inexplicable object ultimately unveils itself as an exploding bomb, obliquely evincing nuclear unease and the fear of communism. Hammer's ravenous search for the box, however, oozes greed and contemporaneous American consumerism. It is the alleged value of the great whatsit that drives the male protagonist. Nothing more and nothing less. Hammer is a materialist and emblematic of the dominant consumer culture of the 1950s. He is obsessed with next level technology, drives fast sports cars, and defines women by the shapes of their bodies. The guy is generally very rude and casually threatens or beats up people for information. But for all his ferocities, there still are some divided attitudes toward the character in modern film studies. That is, film scholars have contradictory understandings of Mike Hammer. On the one hand, he is an embodiment of a more cynical right-winged capitalism. As William Luhr writes, "he embodies a type of brash, arrogant American masculinity that would largely die out by the 1960s" (2012: 124). Michael E. Grost, on the other hand, suspects a deeper, indigestible nonconformism in the character. "One also suspects that he is deeply conscious," Grost writes, "trying to suppress impulses in himself that 50's culture does not allow him to express, such as a love for culture" (in Silver & Ursini 2004: 116). If Hammer

is an outsider with a love for culture it shows in his interactions with African-Americans. Ethnic outcasts are in fact the only individuals he treats with some degree of dignity in the film. Similarly, minority bit players are the only people who appear to be his genuine friends. For James Naremore, this makes him a “‘White Negro’ ... a relatively sympathetic embodiment of urban liberalism” (1998: 241). Hammer listens to Nat King Cole on his car radio and frequents a black jazzclub named Club Pigalle, a real venue filmed on location in downtown Los Angeles. He drinks down his sorrows here, finding solace in the blues of mulatto singer Madi Comfort. Pigalle is inhabited by coolly sophisticated black men, smoking, drinking and listening diligently to the blueswoman. This downtown L.A. venue certainly offers a soother black nightlife than the swingy Harlem joints in *When Strangers Marry* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947). Accompanied by Eddie Beal’s soft piano tinkling, Comfort offers the protagonist a sensuous rendition of Cole’s composition. Except it isn’t her voice that we hear; she merely lip-syncs Kitty White’s pre-recorded vocals. Aldrich reportedly praised her in hindsight: “If I’d known you sang as well as you do, I’d have had you sing the piece in our picture” (in Hodel 2012: 4). Comfort was certainly cast for reasons other than those of her singing abilities. Fronting several beauty publications, including the cover of *Ebony* Magazine in 1955, Comfort was a successful model and an attractive woman to men of all races. She could also sing, as Aldrich learned a little too late, and sang in Duke Ellington’s orchestra in the ‘50s (which Marie Bryant and Dolores Parker did in the ‘40s). The singer/model was in fact Ellington’s lady of inspiration for his 1956 hit song “Satin Doll.” Named ‘Mattie’ at birth, Ellington encouraged her to change to ‘Madi’ because, in the words of the pianist, “you really are the Mad One, you know” (ibid: 5). Charles Mingus once described her as “not black enough” to speak a certain way, but she was nonetheless white enough to be pursued by powerful white men (in Santoro 2000: 189). Interestingly, Comfort was entangled in infamously criminal and indeed noirish events prior to her casting in *Kiss Me Deadly*. She was the mistress of George Hodel, a white physician and alleged serial killer that was prime suspect in the 1947 murder of Elizabeth ‘Black Dahlia’ Short. The murder was highly publicized due to its graphical obscenity (Hodel’s son, homicide detective Steve Hodel, has written extensively on the murder which he believes was his father’s crime). Their interracial affair was disclosed when the LAPD retrieved nude photos of Comfort and Short from Hodel’s personal belongings. Interrogated by the police in 1951, Comfort admitted her liaison with Hodel and their shared acquaintanceship with Short. She denied, however, possession of knowledge related to Hodel’s potential involvement in the murder (Hodel

2003: 501). In 2003, shortly before her own death, she finally revealed: “We all knew that he had done it” (in Hodel 2012: 18). Comfort had held onto the secret for more than 50 years out of fear for her own life. Indeed, this gritty story sounds taken out of a film noir itself and lends nuance to her ostensibly appropriate appearance in *Kiss Me Deadly*. Although cast for mainly photogenic purposes and ghosted by another black female vocalist, Comfort still projects the role of the nightclub singer within the world of the film and should be examined as such. Hammer, who is intoxicated and mournful from Nick’s recent death, is spellbound by the diegetic blueswoman. However, he looks captured by both her meaningful musicality and potentially aestheticized sexuality. First, her diegetic rendition of “I’d Rather Have the Blues” accounts for black racial struggles even as it foretells Hammer’s existential obstacles. Here’s the verse that holds his attention:

The room is dark and gloomy

You don’t know what you’re doing to me

The web has got me caught

I’d rather have the blues than what I’ve got

Her musical imagery designates the social imprisonment of both camps. Black female singers, on the one hand, were caught by the racially and gendered oppressive systems intrinsic in Hollywood filmmaking and in dominant culture at large. Noir antiheroes, on the other, were caught by the vagrant demands and anxieties of postwar urban life. They would both rather have the blues than their respective melancholies. Nat King Cole’s song further predicates the advent of a larger fear than that of racial blackness: the atomic bomb. As Cyndy Hendershot writes, “Cold War Society suffers from a malaise worse than the blues” (2003: 106). Tony Williams praises Comfort’s number: “Performed by Comfort in the manner of a cabaret torch singer, the lines ‘The web has got me caught’ and ‘I’d rather have the blues than what I’ve got’ evocatively complement the film’s narrative” (2004: 127).





22. A sexy Madi Comfort delivering Nat King Cole's "I'd Rather Have the Blues" in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).



23. Mike Hammer looking on sultrily.

But she also, as Williams next indicates, “employs a performance style also characterizing [Billie] Holiday’s successors at Café Society such as Hazel Scott and Lena Horne” (ibid). Which in turn allows for the mise-en-scene in Club Pigalle to promote and suture to the (white) male gaze. In the revised screenplay, dated November 29, 1954, A.I. Bezzerides meticulously describes the singer as “an extremely attractive young colored woman” (1954: 93). Indeed, this description sounds written for Comfort and is informed by Hollywood’s dominant sexualized orientation towards black female singers and dancers. At least three of the four adjectives used by Bezzerides are unmerited unless they are designed to paint a very particular picture of the singer. The representation of Comfort plays on her external status as sex symbol and object of white sexual predilection (to the extent possible in a ‘50s film). Aldrich even ran into trouble with the censors over how Comfort caresses her microphone, evoking certain phallic imagery (Silver & Ursini 1995: 9; Miller & Arnold 2004: 62). There is a striking level of sexual desire in the manner that Hammer contemplates the modelling singer. Comfort is progressively dressed, surrounded by onlooking black males and her image is, not unlike Cole’s in *The Blue Gardenia*, reinforced in a mirror hanging behind the protagonist. In the mirror, one glimpses that Comfort returns the gaze to Hammer. She turns her head in another direction just as he cheekily turns to the bartender. Nevertheless, the prevalence of male gaze does not undermine the possibility of an interracial infatuation between two individuals who are hinted as prior acquaintances. As noted, Comfort was no stranger to intersexual relationships. In an unrevised and undated version of the screenplay, it is implied that Hammer and the nightclub singer are paramours. This version daringly includes a piece of verbal and gestural communication that not only concludes the Club Pigalle sequence but also hints at their mutual affectionate history:

SINGER

(anxiously)

You said for me to wait for  
you, Mister Hammer . . .

Mike touches her cheek, as he exits.

There is no other evidence for their possible relationship elsewhere in the script and their theorized tender encounter certainly comes out of nowhere. Perhaps additional evidence lies in earlier versions of the screenplay. Still, Bezzerides cleverly packs racially progressive undertones into

this seemingly minor mixed-race exchange. Undertones that, clearly and outermost unfortunately, were considered too broadminded for the encounter to survive the revised script and filmed sequence. Yet they suggest a passionate infatuation between the two characters, existing just beyond the frame of the film. It is nevertheless noteworthy that this portion of dialogue and gesture did not make it to the film, while the amorously charged interracial exchange in *The Big Night*, a B movie from four years earlier, had no issue being actualized on screen. Unless, of course, Aldrich himself chose to ignore this segment from Bezzerides' screenplay. Art Loggins, friend and bartender, coats his concern for Hammer's insobriety with a cool decoration of black street lingo: "Hey man, you sure look beat, you look real lean, real wasted. What's got you man? You don't look like you with it." Loggins' comment takes for granted that Hammer is familiar with black slang, or jive talk as it is popularly called, signifying their companionship and Hammer's frequency in Club Pigalle. Robert Brustein explains that slang was "a coterie argot designed to exclude the common run of 'squares' who don't 'dig' their message" (in Charters: 2001: 51). Along these lines, Hammer is not a square because he understands African-American underground terminology. For all his cool detachment, however, Hammer's screened visit to Pigalle entails complex racial implications. Although many whites discharged honest reverence for black cultural forms, they still occupied inadvertently privileged positions in society that assured that this admiration would uphold dominant racial ideology. As a white person entering an ethnic space one brings along a set of preconceived social values that influences this entrance. As mentioned, James Naremore labels Hammer a 'White Negro,' which, by definition, is not necessarily a fallacious personification. In 1957, two years after the release of *Kiss Me Deadly*, Norman Mailer wrote an essay in which he recognized a consistent social pattern: white postwar existentialists were mesmerized by the free-spirited and vibrant rhythms of African-American jazz music. The white hipster "was attracted to what the Negro had to offer," Mailer writes, "and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro" (in Sipiora 2014: 44-6). Naremore ignores, however, the racist backlashing inherent in Mailer's flawed and outdated essay. Though writing from a standpoint of integration, Mailer conceptually appropriates and mythologizes black culture in his recognition of white liberalism. Mailer seems to think he knows more about black existence than African-Americans do themselves. "The Negro," Mailer continues, "kept for his survival the art of the primitive ... relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body" (ibid: 45-6). His wide generalizations become more indicative of the racial mythologies

created by white establishments than they enlighten his actual subject matter. His profuse intentions are recoiled by the dominant racial ideology under which he so tellingly lived. Mailer's essay has been heavily scrutinized over the years and there is little credibility left in his concept. It is therefore slightly narrowing of Naremore to incorporate 'White Negro' in merely identifying the 'positive' mixed-race interactions of film noir, though Hammer might very well be one. In fact, Mailer's illusory presumptions of race are not so dissimilar from how filmmakers describe and represent jazz musicians in classical film noir. As I consistently address, writers and directors alike frequently construct nightclub sequences, whether knowingly or not, within a racially discursive framework. Both Mailer and film noir are partial products of the same racialized period in time. Although *Kiss Me Deadly* was made by radical creatives who intended for noble interracial encounters, much in the same way that leftist Mailer encouraged such interaction, the film is fractionally informed by socially embedded racial structures. Based on our initial understanding of him, Hammer looks slightly misplaced in Club Pigalle. His ties to black culture are much at odds with his otherwise consumerist and misogynist characteristics. Surely, the camera work and mise-en-scene emphasize that he is the only visiting white patron. Hammer is filmed from numerous angles that foreground him against the distant presence of black figures in various corners of the nightclub. Painted dark by noir shadows, the African-American clientele aestheticizes the exotic background of the spot. In post-colonial terms, Hammer is, like Jeff in *Out of the Past*, the white explorer that overwrites foreign space simply through his being and seeing. Jonathan Auerbach suggests that the black nightclub sequence in *Kiss Me Deadly* is delivered somewhat "gratuitously" (2011: 195). It is nowhere in Mickey Spillane's literary source and makes limited claim for the advancement of the storyline. Nicole Rafter, similarly, argues:

The black bartender and black singer at Pigalle, a bar Mike frequents, function only as props, to create atmosphere and show that Mike is a liberal; they, too, are dehumanized ... [They] elevate both Mike Hammer and Anglo-Saxon whiteness (2000: 83-4).

While this isn't entirely true (the blues comments genuinely on cold war paranoia), there is an unfortunate insistence on delineating the hipness of the white protagonist. Naremore asserts that such moments provide the antihero with "an aura of 'cool,'" but he doesn't problematize the complexities inherent in such interracial exchanges (1998: 240). More than sensitively representing black bit players, these sequences boost and celebrate the social flexibility of white

protagonists by depicting them as more than liberal enough to hang out in all-black venues. Following Comfort's musical delivery, a dissolve pinpoints the passage of time and shows Hammer drunkenly asleep on the bar table. It is late night (according to the script after two o'clock), and only the singer and bartender remain with him in the club. The sophisticated black patrons have gone home already. Evoking the ending of the nightclub sequence in *Force of Evil* (1949), Loggins deplorably informs the smashed protagonist that Velda, Hammer's secretary, has been kidnapped. Hammer knows he must go, and on his way out, he engages in a moment of emotionally streaked eye contact with Comfort. Spectators who have not read the screenplay may wonder why the singer is still at Pigalle, given that her musical duties are fulfilled and that we are long into the afterhours. But as Bezzerides' script suggests, Hammer had previously asked her to wait for him, and as we can see, she is loyally waiting. Rather than "anxiously" reminding him of this, however, she simply says "I'm sorry, Mike." He neither caresses her cheek, but merely replies with a "thanks, kid." Still, the script develops limited understanding on the singer's part that Hammer must go get his secretary back; it rather fuels her lust and desire for the protagonist. In the film, she at least emits a stronger degree of sympathy for Hammer's increasingly menacing situation. And though the scripted exchange offers more representational bravery, insinuating more extensively towards their interracial liaison, hints of affection between the racial counterparts certainly remain in Aldrich's visualization. *Kiss Me Deadly*, then, while never explicitly 'about' race, is certainly informed by contemporary racial issues on various levels. From its profound representation of the blues, to its subtle hints towards miscegenation, to its time-bound comments on white hipsterism, themes of race carefully fluctuates through this celebrated film noir classic.



# Chapter 4

## All Men Are Evil: Modern Jazz & the Black Musician as Protagonist (1957-1959)

Chronologically speaking, this chapter picks up where the preceding one finished. In other words, it is concerned with the representations of jazz and race in the films from the final few years of classical film noir. A lot had changed, however, both in the film industry, jazz milieus, and society at large, when jazz bands resurfaced in the film noirs of the late '50s. With Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte paving the way, old stereotypes were gradually abandoned, and more dignified images of African-Americans emerged on film. Thanks to bebop and cool jazz, black musical styles were becoming increasingly accepted as genuine art forms. A new generation of socially conscious musicians had risen to prominence, a generation that refused self-degrading showmanship whether in nightclubs, concert halls or in movies. Fronted by Lester Young, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, among others, this new group of artists created experimental rhythms and overthrew the grinning and crowd pleasing that characterized their predecessors. As John Gennari writes, modern jazz musicians “were trying to find a serious audience for an artistically adventurous and intellectually challenging music” (in O’Meally 2004: 146). Hollywood, then, was finally ready to include humbler pictures of the modern jazz movement.

### 4.1 *Sweet Smell of Success*

These musical and cultural shifts are perhaps first and foremost resonant in Alexander Mackendrick’s *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). The film circumscribes an unhealthily twisted love triangle between a brother, sister, and a lover. J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster), a syndicated newspaper columnist, despotically commands his sister Susan (Susan Harrison) to end her relationship with jazz guitarist Steve Dallas (Martin Milner). Hunsecker recruits Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis), aspiring press agent and bootlicking errand boy, to break up the romance between the young couple. The implication being that Hunsecker cannot stand the idea of Susan marrying a bourgeois jazz musician. Indeed, this is a different Burt Lancaster than the Lancaster in *I Walk Alone* (1948) who evinces a profound nostalgia for older idioms of jazz. Mackendrick’s picture

features the Chico Hamilton Quintet both as soundtrack contributors, diegetic source music and accompanying actors. Hamilton's quintet, a mixed-race band influential on the Los Angeles jazz scene, here performs for white clientele in the upscale Manhattan venues Elysian Club and Robards. Not unlike Buddy Collette's sextet in *Force of Evil* (1949), Hamilton's combo offers a westcoast aroma to this late New York noir. Chico Hamilton is not only the bandleader but also the sole black member of the group, which diegetically includes Milner/Dallas (guitar), Fred Katz (cello), Carson Smith (bass), and Paul Horn (sax), the last of whom replaced Collette a year earlier. Milner was not a musician in real life and his guitar work is ghosted by John Pisano, the actual guitarist in Hamilton's quintet. Since Milner also plays a leading character in the film, he even serves as onscreen and indeed fictional bandleader for narrative purposes. Although this filmic substitution conveniently downplays the importance of a black musician in a Hollywood picture, there are markers that reveal Hamilton's authority as the authentic frontman. Hamilton was originally inspired by swing drummer Jo Jones in his early years, but later innovated a sophisticated style of drumming. Ted Gioia concurs: "His drum attack was far from old-fashioned; his sensitivity, taste, and dynamic range were fresh and invigorating in the wake of the modern jazz revolution" (1998: 187). Ron Spagnardi, similarly, attests that "Chico Hamilton's artistic approach reflected a classic refinement of jazz drumming" (1992: 57). In *Sweet Smell of Success*, Hamilton discharges a reticent and uncompromising attitude both through his music and personality. In the opening nightclub sequence at the Elysian, all members of the quintet are visually established in a collective semi close-up. This shot is liberating because it altogether unveils the racially diverse combo in an unproblematic fashion. No separate shot is required to cinematically distance the black from the white. The camera roams freely around the bandstand, detailing the unique instrumentation of every musician. This visual freedom was consciously planned in Ernest Lehman's and Clifford Odets' revised script: "CAMERA is on the bandstand, moving smoothly through the group of five musicians as the rhythm of a new number is set up" (1957). Their modern jazz number, which incorporates unusual instrumentation in its electric guitar and flute patterns, is relatively shielded from the white clientele. Hamilton's quintet, while still occupying the main point of convergence, creates the impression of modern artists playing for their own delectation. Similarly, *Sweet Smell* demonstrates limited need for gratuitous audience reaction shots to legitimize jazz. The musicians legitimize themselves through their own



musicianship. Lehman and Odets seemed equally conscious of this. The scriptwriters evoke the detached cool of a typical modern jazz player in their description of Milner's character:

CAMERA lingers a moment on the guitarist, STEVE DALLAS. He is a youth of pleasant, intelligent appearance. He plays with the intent air of the contemporary jazz musician who takes his work very seriously indeed and affects a much greater interest in the music and his fellow musicians than in the listening audience (1957: 3).

This description completely contradicts previous representations of jazz musicians in film noir. But as much as it speaks for Dallas, it also speaks for Chico Hamilton. The drummer is free from usual stereotypes and evades superficial audience interaction. Effortlessly tapping his drums, Hamilton indulges into himself and the interconnection with his fellow bandmates. At the conclusion of their number, it is Hamilton who is foregrounded in a privileged low-angle shot, displaying his rhythmically refined repertoire take precedence over the secondary sounds of his colleagues. Hamilton transfers his unassuming intellectualism to the moments of dialogue he is provided elsewhere in the film. Although he was never really an actor, Hamilton is given a few opportunities to administrate his cool demeanor in favor of his targeted bandmate. After their performance, Steve sneaks out the backdoor to privately engage in a tender moment with his girlfriend Susan. Falco, however, is already in the building looking for Steve. When Curtis' character approaches the backdoor, Hamilton already blocks it, as if instinctively knowing that someone is after his friend and colleague. Falco asks the quintet about Steve's whereabouts, but they remain silent, until bandleader Hamilton takes the case: "He's around somewhere. Upstairs. Maybe." The drummer lies, though unconvincingly, to the white protagonist without a care in the world. With a cigarette in his hand and smoke blowing out his nose, Hamilton aestheticizes the rebellious and withdrawn look of cool emblematic of the modern jazz musician. Obliviously staring to the ground, he only half-responds to the question in a low, deep voice, barely acknowledging Falco's presence. His reclusive, physiognomic resistance delays the narrative and, by extension, refuses to satisfy the white man. As David Toop writes, Hamilton and his "music enacted in its rather mannered, elegant way a broader political struggle" (2016: 121).



24. The Chico Hamilton Quintet in *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957).

#### 4.2 *I Want to Live!*

The prospect of the intellectual jazz artist is similarly carried out in Robert Wise's late noir *I Want to Live!* (1958). The opening sequence of the film takes place in a San Francisco basement joint, showcasing a mixed-race jazz combo perform for a racially diverse clientele. The band is fronted by the white baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and features, among others, bebop trumpeter Art Farmer. Mulligan's band is playing bebop and the film recognizes the artistry of the style, in alignment with the nightclub description provided in Nelson Gidding's screenplay:

INT. THE NEW FRISCO CLUB - FULL SHOT - NIGHT

Crowded and jumping, it's a San Francisco hot-spot. The varied characters who frequent it are having themselves a whale of a time. The small JAZZ COMBINE on the stand blows something closer to bop than the progressive music at the opening. No dancing, just jazz---REAL jazz.

GROUP SHOT - JAZZ COMBINE

A low, crazy ANGLE, FAVOURING the drum which is littered: GOLDEN CATERS. The COLORED ALTO-SAX PLAYER preaches up a storm a la Charlie Parker. (1958: 1)

If Wise's film had stayed completely faithful to Gidding's script, the diegetic bandleader would not have been Mulligan but an African-American saxophone player. The film otherwise captures the exhilarating atmosphere and progressive description of jazz established in the script rather genuinely. Most interesting here is perhaps how both screenplay and film treat bebop. As opposed to films such as *The Big Night* (1951), where bebop was described as deafening in the script and represented in the film accordingly, *I Want to Live!* categorizes and depicts bop as "real jazz." Gidding's "no dancing" fragment even subtly criticizes the interactive swing era and its light entertainment values. Rather than being secondary to dancing and drinking, jazz should take first priority. Nightclub patrons should sit still and concentrate on the music. In the film, audience members sit steady to properly inhale the boppish number of Mulligan's band. As usually the case with racially diverse jazz bands in film noir, Mulligan's combo is all-white except for one black musician. Indeed, Gidding's and Wise's benevolent representation of bebop could have ended up less progressive if the majority of the musicians were black. Their depiction could have been equally primitive had the frontman been black, as Gidding's screenplay initially suggested. Mulligan's only black sideman is Art Farmer, a modern, restrained and introspective trumpeter. Farmer appears in the same low angle close shot as his fellow white bandmates. Extremely rare for classical film noir, and to my knowledge only previously displayed in *Night Without Sleep*, this Frisco club holds a decent amount of both black and white patrons. Due to racial segregation, nightclub clienteles in film noir are usually either all-white or all-black (the black clubs, of course, also display white protagonists whose liberalism is defined by their ability to transgress this segregation). In *I Want to Live!*, it is nevertheless the white audience members that are visually prioritized; the black patrons are consistently in the background. Although this interracial audience contains a few caricatured beatniks, it is far from as flamboyant as the white clientele in *D.O.A.*'s San Francisco nightclub of almost ten years before. Following on from *Sweet Smell*, it offers the prospect of intellectual artists jamming for their own recreation and presents a rather naturally fluctuating nightclub sequence at least compared to the racially stylized ones of '40s film noir. Rather than being dismissed to the exotic periphery, jazz performance becomes the center of attention. Mulligan's band distributes two extensive solos, the first performed by the saxophone-playing bandleader himself and the second by trumpeter Art Farmer. The former takes visual

superiority over the latter in that it receives more attention through a privileged low angle shot. Farmer, by contrast, is visually skewed to the upper left corner of the frame, rendering only half his face visible during his solo. Indeed, the opening nightclub sequence in *I Want to Live!* employs distorted and tilted angles arguably in reflection of the cognitive instability that derive from the patrons' likely alcohol and drug consumption. The shots of Farmer still capture the details in his instrumentation and the refinement of his stage presence. With his eyes closed and a solemn facial physiognomy, the trumpeter delves with deep concentration into his artistry while completely neglecting his audience. As Krin Gabbard writes: "His lyricism, soft tone, hesitant delivery, and lack of stage mannerisms all represent a retreat from phallic bravado ... there is no obvious hysterical edge to Farmer's self-presentation" (1995: 111). Like Chico Hamilton is the antithesis to Jo Jones is Farmer the counterpoint to Louis Armstrong. For the brief period the modern trumpeter is onscreen, he resembles the sophistication of Gerald Wilson in *Out of the Past* (1947), Ernie Royal in *The Secret Fury* (1950), and Benny Carter in *Night Without Sleep* (1952). As Farmer even admitted himself: "I'm an introvert and kind of reclusive" (in Balliett 2005: 448). His diegetic trumpet solo further scores the introduction of the two most prevalent characters in the film. His blows first accompany the arrival of Ed Montgomery (Simon Oakley), the ambiguous newspaper reporter who, after exploiting the story of Barbara Graham (Susan Hayward), wants to correct the damage done. Farmer's solo is still heard when the camera moves up to a hotel room just a couple floors above the club, loosely underscoring the orgasmic introduction of Barbara Graham herself. Although *I Want to Live!* connects jazz to Graham's degenerate life of alcoholism, partying and prostitution, Wise ultimately bestows her sympathy for being punished by the death penalty in the wake of a murder for which she clearly stands innocent.



25. A foregrounded Art Farmer performing a bebop solo in *I Want to Live!* (1958).

### 4.3 *Odds Against Tomorrow*: The Jazz Musician as Protagonist

In 1959, the closing year of classical film noir, Harry Belafonte produced and starred in the heist thriller *Odds Against Tomorrow*. This is the last film noir of the classical era yet the first one to feature a black protagonist. In this gritty crime thriller, Belafonte counters preceding representations of African-Americans in Hollywood cinema, with particular reference to the saintly and dimensionless Sidney Poitier characters which thrived throughout the '50s. Through HarBel Productions, his own production company, Belafonte constructs a morally ambiguous black jazz musician with strengths and weaknesses in the spirit of the white male antihero. The unmistakable difference being that he also incorporates themes of racial struggle into the existentialism of his noir protagonist. Given their enduring status as victims of oppression, minorities always could have created eloquent images of isolated noir figures. Their outsider position could have blended seamlessly with noir sensibilities, but social and institutional

discrimination prevented minority filmmakers and actors from embracing such opportunities. At long last, film noir finally fulfills the potential of envisioning a black protagonist who is trapped in the racialized society of which he lives. Yet in *Odds Against Tomorrow*, racial conflict only plays a part, combating the common assumption that films featuring black leading characters, such as those with Poitier, have to first and foremost be ‘about’ race. In Belafonte’s take on the heist film, race is one of the factors that contribute to the formation of its noir aesthetic. Upon making *Odds*, the young actor-singer-producer handpicked a unique group of radical creatives who all opposed the ideological machinery of the film industry. Belafonte was impressed by *I Want to Live!* and consulted Robert Wise as director. As scriptwriter, he enquired Abraham Polonsky, the leftist who had previously written and directed the celebrated John Garfield vehicle *Force of Evil* (1949). The only problem, however, was that Polonsky was blacklisted by the HUAC for his communist sympathies. Polonsky therefore ghostwrote the screenplay under a different name, that of Belafonte’s friend and novelist John O. Killens, who became the credited scriptwriter. It was not until 1996, three years before his own death, that Polonsky received public credibility for his contribution to the film. Belafonte chose the unconventional cinematographer Joseph Brun as his film photographer. In *Odds*, Brun abandons the archetypical black-and-white cinematography in favor of a more distinctive grayness. Brun paints a grim, bleak picture of New York in this film noir. As he recalls Wise’s words on set: “We shall ignore the rules and regulations of conventional visualization” (1959: 479). His camera work was praised upon release. Bosley Crowther wrote that it captures “the look of actuality,” while Derek Conrad remarked that it is “almost more expressive than the actors” (Crowther 1959; Conrad 1959: 25). Moreover, Brun’s cinematography brings about a racially neutralizing effect. It overthrows the racially charged black-and-white cinematography by developing a more consistent gray look. Its shades of gray avoids the racial colorism inherent in the usual high contrast lighting of film noir, which has been discussed in the preceding chapters. Brun’s photography intangibly proposes the outlook of a world where no man is better than the other, symbolically representing a ‘gray area’ between totalizing categories. Yet, this gray quality equally accentuates *Odds*’ grittiness and destructive themes. Rather than employing conventional shadows and stylized chiaroscuro, Brun opts for a desolated look of gray to convey darkness and disillusionment. As Henrik Gustafsson writes, “Robert Wise’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) announced this move out of stylized chiaroscuro into bright desolation” (in Spicer & Hanson 2013: 61). In this late Wise noir, gray is the new dark. For Paul Buhle and

Dave Wagner, Brun's innovative photography in *Odds* "gave neo-noir filmmakers another model of the dark city" (2001: 184). John Lewis and his Modern Jazz Quartet composed the soundtrack, airing a smooth blend of jazz and classical music. MJQ operated within the subgenres of cool jazz and bebop and was a driving force in the westcoast modern jazz revolution. Lewis' band also became the first African-American jazz band to ever score a film noir. Their nondiegetic score offers, as Royal S. Brown writes, "a consistently moody interplay of timbres and dissonant harmonies that strikingly parallel the coldness and loneliness of the film's winter settings ... and the bitterness of its narrative" (1994: 185). Their modern jazz further complements the rebellious cool of the black protagonist. Belafonte plays Johnny Ingram: a jazz musician, gambling addict, and father. But he isn't a family man, though he aspires to be. His line of work and expensive hobby have estranged him from his wife and daughter. Making matters worse, Ingram owes gambling money to a local gangster. Occupying a relentlessly cold realm of addiction, crime, and solitude, Ingram struggles to find his place in the world. Until ex-cop David Burke (Ed Begley) unveils the masterly planned bank robbery that will put an end to Ingram's existential and financial misery. That is, if it succeeds. For the black protagonist, who feels increasingly trapped in his own sphere of desperation, the heist will fix everything. But Burke also enlists the racist yet equally despondent war vet Earle Slater (Robert Ryan). The three lowlifers form an improbable trio whose chances to cooperatively execute a robbery seem unlikely. Ingram's and Slater's hostility towards each other, combined with their otherwise despaired lives, fiercely limit the possibility of these men returning from the heist victoriously. For all their exchanged animosity, however, Burke's conflicting enlistees have more in common than they think. Both men are embodiments of the pessimistic noir antihero who fails to take control over his own life. As Justin Busch writes, Ingram is "as self-destructive as Earl, and for much the same reason: he has internalized warped definitions, of himself and of others, derived from a system which is itself warped" (2010: 107). One of *Odds*' definitive strengths is that is, as artistically painted by the gray middle ground of Brun's ingenious photography, refuses to glorify one man over the other. Polonsky's script distributes an equal amount of emphasis on both players and portrays them as multidimensional characters with positive and negative capacities. Like Ingram is no straightforward hero is Slater no obvious villain. This is how Wise's picture evades the frivolousness and superficiality of the social problem films. *Odds* confronts the social problem genre in that it contradicts the romanticizing image of the saintly black man as projected by the Sidney Poitier characters. It

refuses to have the black man make a sacrifice in order for the white man to respect him. Belafonte admits:

Take my good friend Sidney Poitier; he always plays the role of the good and patient fellow who finally wins the understanding of his white brothers. Well, I think audiences are ready to go beyond even films like *The Defiant Ones*. I think they would be terrifically relieved to see on screen the Negro as he really is and not as one side of a black-and-white sociological argument where brotherhood always wins at the end (in Schultheiss 1999: 158).

This is thus what makes *Odds* a film noir. Rather than perpetuating the black saint stereotype, Belafonte initiates the prospect of a morally flawed protagonist with the resistance to confront white supremacist structures. Its social commentary is thus packed into a larger scope of paranoia and anxiety. That is, racial conflict is tightly imbricated in noir themes and conventions. As Jim Pines writes, “it is not simply a racial movie operating separately from popular genre conventions” (1975: 87-8). *Odds* is not about race per se, but a film where race is one of several factors that lead to a climactic explosion. It raises zero interest in simply scrutinizing the two leads but attempts to develop an understanding for the source of their hatred. The film’s mediating approach is foreshadowed already in the opening credits. The title sequence illustrates the collapse of racial binaries in its constant color merging. Abstract patterns of black, white and gray overlap and merge together, eliminating fixed distinctions between black and white. *Odds* consistently practices the dissolve of clear-cut colors and subversively criticizes the essentialism that these colors represent. In the first image of Slater walking down the street, harsh lighting exaggerates his facial features to the point that one begins to question his whiteness on such a premise. This overcooked illumination discloses the artifice of whiteness and reminds us of the visual manipulation intrinsic in the cinematic apparatus. Slater enters Burke’s residence and agrees to do the bank job. That is, until he learns the racial identity of Ingram: “You didn’t say nothing about the third man being a nigger.” His offensive slur is heightened by the immediate cut to a close-up of a singing Ingram in a Harlem nightclub. This provoking transition sets up the black protagonist as a dignified musician with a cool demeanor that denounces Slater’s derogatory aspersion. It effectively overlaps the two characters and mobilizes their relational suspense which ultimately sends them to stark destruction. This is Wise editing at its finest. As Richard Keenan writes, “his transitions are never abrupt or disorienting, but are usually keyed to a line of dialogue that enables the act of transition itself to



make a statement” (2007: 110). In ‘40s noir, transitions sometimes implicate black musicians and stock characters in white abasement: they provide a racially black source for the immorally dark deeds of white characters. *Odds*’ powerful transition, conversely, inventively delegitimizes Slater’s discriminatory remark. Ironically, the low-key rendition of Slater renders him way darker than the spotlighted Ingram, undermining the racial insult of the white racist. Borrowing from Manthia Diawara’s analogy on black representation in neo-noir, the light shed on Ingram is not meant to render him white, but visible (in Copjec 1993: 263).



In Club Canny, the smoky Harlem nightclub, Ingram plays the vibraphone and sings “My Baby’s Not Around,” a bluesy song composed by MJQ and written by Belafonte. On the bandstand, Ingram is backed by a bassist, pianist, and drummer. In the vein of the Harlem club in *Night Without Sleep* (1952) and the Frisco club in *I Want to Live!* (1958), this venue holds a racially diverse nightclub clientele. Similarly, the nightclub sequence in *Odds* seamlessly runs its course without gratuitous racial markers that uplift whiteness or aestheticize racial otherness. In fact, blackness is not the locus of otherness but the perspective from which we follow the nightclub narrative. Polonsky’s script, too, refuses to provide primitive descriptions of blackness and jazz. Rather than describing black musicians as ‘negroes’ or ‘colored,’ which previous noir screenplays have frequently done, Polonsky bracingly describes Belafonte and his band as “African Americans” (in Schultheiss 1999: 46). The latter term was, at the time, a self-liberating term that blacks began identifying themselves with, as opposed to previous racist labels that were forced onto them by whites. The club sequence encompasses Ingram’s cool stage affectation, his romantic encounter with a black female admirer, his meeting with the gangster that calls in the gambling debts, and finally his agitated musical number that reflects his increasing desperation. His rendition of “My Baby’s Not Around,” which enunciates emotive anguish and corrosive lyricism, parallels his disparaging existentialism and anticipates his ultimate demise. Singing “I just can’t make that jungle outside my front door,” it is the gray asphalt jungle of New York City he is referring to. His immediate threat, however, isn’t racism, but the money he owes to a local gangster named Bacco (Will Kuluva). When Bacco and his entourage enter Canny’s, Ingram gazes with aggravated contempt at the gangsters, completely fearless of the dangers that their underworld represent to him. Ingram has no intention of paying his debts, let alone executing the heist, until Bacco threatens his dear wife and daughter. Shuddered by Bacco’s ultimatum, the protagonist reinvents himself as a frantic and rhythmically loose jazz musician. Mae Barnes now sings the blues song “All Men Are Evil,” another MJQ and Belafonte collaboration, and is deliriously interrupted by a drunk and muddled protagonist. Ingram sings into Barnes’ microphone in what first appears as a not too harmful call-and-response improvisation. The blueswoman, however, is visibly unimpressed by his unsolicited musical intrusion. But he only makes matters worse. To Barnes’ and the other nightclub patrons’ dismay, Ingram embarks on a frantic vibraphone improvisation and scats inconsequentially into Barnes’ microphone. In the most contiguous sense, his bruising instrumentation and loud humming can be said to conform to the myth of the primitive black

musician. For Morris Holbrook, Ingram's "vibraphonic onslaught seems more offensive, uncontrolled, and even sociopathic than anything we could have imagined" at this point in time (2011: 260). But his aggressive, improvisational outburst derives from his inner frustrations and Bacco's recent coldblooded threat. As Christopher Coady writes, the performance reveals "the potential for improvisation in film to convey a complex array of emotions spanning distress, anger, and guilt" (2016: 156). It also shows, both for better and for worse, his complete disregard for his diegetic audience. The title phrase of the song – all men are evil – reflects the notion that all men, whether black or white, young or old, rich or poor, straight or gay, can be morally flawed. Mae Barnes wraps up the sequence: "that little boy is in big trouble." The nightclub sequence, which it also does in several other film noirs, here represents a narrative turning point for the male protagonist. It is in Club Canoy that he decides to execute the heist which, due to the racial tension that escalates between Ingram and Slater, culminates in a climactic, postapocalyptic detonation. This powerful finale, indeed evoking the explosive endings of pictures such as *White Heat* (1949) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), concludes the classical era of film noir in a jaundiced fashion that teaches us about the destructivity of racism while also obliquely commenting on the nuclear anxiety of the externally intensifying cold war.

## Concluding Comments

I began the research for this project with a predetermined assumption that everything jazz signified in film noir was sex, crime, and anxiety; the characteristic themes of this treasured film category. This assumption corresponds only partially with my finalized discoveries. As my chapter on 1940s noir has demonstrated, it is predominantly in the first decade of the cycle that appalling utilizations of jazz, indeed underscoring the above promiscuous themes, can be located and dichotomized. There appears to even be a conscious effort and intentionalism by white filmmakers to appropriate jazz in such ways, stridently exposed by the often primitivist and degenerate descriptions of jazz found in many of their screenplays. It is therefore no coincidence that dubious associations between black music and distinctive noir decadence are invigorated in many of the early to peak noir films. From its association with anxiety in *When Strangers Marry*, to its association with sexual energy in *The Dark Corner*, to delinquency in *Kiss of Death*, and to its ultimate association with all these modes of debauchery in the climactic and canonical *D.O.A.*, my initial findings matched by preconceived expectations. What I did not fully expect, however, was for the purposes of jazz in these wartime and postwar crime films to be so prudently detailed and preplanned at the screenwriting phase of the production processes. My initial assumption was that jazz was not ‘serious’ enough of an artform to be integrated into the scripts, at best improvised during filming. But jazz was important for noir screenwriters, so important that if it wasn’t for them there probably wouldn’t be any inclusions of the music in the actual movies. The screenplay that flabbergasted me the most, moreover, was the one for *Out of the Past* because of how unforgivably racist and stereotypical it was, for not to mention how different the jazz sequence ended up being visually materialized. Against my own assumptions too was the fact that far from every jazz musician is othered, stereotyped, and exoticized. The representations of the blues and its artists, for example, counterpointed by initial belief that black music was exclusively designed to reiterate white noirish decadence. For a pre-civil rights canon of films, it is remarkable how the blues singers are influencing the films and always having something profound to say about what was going on in the respective narratives. The blues consistently aimed to distance itself from the typical corruption and deception of noir, the types of profligacies that male band music became forcedly associated

with in '40s noir. I was equally surprised by some of the screenplay descriptions of the blues, whether it was the thoughtful delineation written for *House of Strangers* or the highly racialized and sexualized description of the blues provided for *Kiss Me Deadly*. That said, Madi Comfort might have been the only blues singer that was properly sexualized in American noir, at least in the context of how other mulatto singers and dancers such as Lena Horne and Hazel Scott used to be sexualized in the '30s and '40s. In addition to othering, eroticization, and narrative influence, another fundamental aspect of noir jazz is the signification and elevation of white hipness. As I have unswervingly addressed throughout this study, white male antiheroes' admiration for jazz and mingling with black musicians, semiotically emphasized by the choices of camera work, adds an alleged social liberalism to their already established existentialism and nonconformism. While film noir, as scholars have previously pointed out, includes more humane and professional representations of minorities than the norm, these depictions are concurrently designed to lend the white protagonists an air of hipness and thereby celebrate his tolerant, broad-minded whiteness. In the postwar years, jazz was in the know and something many white hipsters was fascinated by (sometimes for the wrong reasons) and desired to associate themselves with. This historical tendency, also known as the beat generation, is consistently reflected in film noir through its constructions of nightclubs showcasing white reverence for black jazz and blues. Also echoed in the cycle is the rise of the modern jazz revolution, notably indicated in the jazzclubs of the late noirs I have discussed where rebelliously cool musicians are playing bebop for racially integrated jazzclub clienteles. *Odds Against Tomorrow*, with its nondiegetic jazz score composed by African American musicians and militant black protagonist, further anticipates the neo-noir movement of the '60s and 70's where black musicians would become working composers and play leading roles as tough guys and characteristic existential antiheroes. In examining the nightclub sequences in classical noir, I hope to have said something smaller about the overall ideology of the canon and about the larger trends and developments of its contemporaneous time. Similarly, I hope to have said something specific about the more general views on jazz, race, and ideology during the phase of the classical noir cycle. What is at least for certain is that I have told histories of film noir through jazz; perhaps just as much as I have told histories of jazz through film noir.

# Filmography

## *The Big Night* (1951)

Director: Joseph Losey

Screenplay: Stanley Ellin, Joseph Losey

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: Mauri Lynn (singer), unidentified drums

## *The Blue Gardenia* (1953)

Director: Fritz Lang

Screenplay: Charles Hoffman

Studio: Warner Bros.

Jazz personnel: Nat King Cole (piano/singer), Papa John Creach (violin)

## *Blues in the Night* (1941)

Director: Anatole Litvak

Screenplay: Robert Rossen

Studio: Warner Bros.

Jazz personnel: Jimmie Lunceford (saxophone), Jimmy Crawford (drums), Joe Thomas (saxophone), Trummy Young (trombone), Gerald Wilson (trumpet), Snooky Young (trumpet)

## *The Crimson Canary* (1945)

Director: John Hoffman

Screenplay: Henry Blankfort

Studio: Universal Pictures

Jazz personnel: Coleman Hawkins (saxophone), Howard McGhee (trumpet), Charles Thompson (piano), Denzil Best (drums), Oscar Pettiford (bass)

## *The Dark Corner* (1946)

Director: Henry Hathaway

Screenplay: Jay Dratler

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Jazz personnel: Eddie Heywood (piano)

## *D.O.A.* (1949)

Director: Rudolph Mate

Screenplay: Russell Rouse, Clarence Greene

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: James Von Streeter (saxophone), Cake Wichard (drums), Shifty Henry (bass), Ray LaRue (piano), Teddy Buckner (trumpet)

*Force of Evil* (1949)

Director: Abraham Polonsky

Screenplay: Abraham Polonsky

Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Jazz personnel: Dudley Brooks (piano), Dootsie Williams (trumpet), Buddy Collette (clarinet/saxophone), Bert Books (drums), unidentified bass and trombone

*The Glass Key* (1942)

Director: Stuart Heisler

Screenplay: Jonathan Latimer

Studio: Paramount Pictures

Jazz personnel: Lillian Randolph (piano/singer)

*House of Strangers* (1949)

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Screenplay: Philip Yordan

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Jazz personnel: Dolores Parker (piano/singer)

*In a Lonely Place* (1950)

Director: Nicholas Ray

Screenplay: Andrew Solt

Studio: Columbia Pictures

Jazz personnel: Hadda Brooks (piano/singer)

*I Want to Live!* (1958)

Director: Robert Wise

Screenplay: Nelson Gidding

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: Art Farmer (trumpet)

*Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)

Director: Robert Aldrich

Screenplay: A.I. Bezzerides

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: Madi Comfort (singer), Eddie Beal (piano)

*Kiss of Death* (1947)

Director: Henry Hathaway

Screenplay: Ben Hecht

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Jazz personnel: J.C. Heard (drums), Al McKibbin (bass), Jimmy Jones (piano)

*Night Without Sleep* (1952)

Director: Roy Ward Baker

Screenplay: Elick Moll, Frank Partos

Studio: 20th Century Fox

Jazz personnel: Mauri Lynn (singer), Benny Carter (trumpet), Keg Johnson (trombone), Ben Webster (sax), Bumps Myers (sax), Jerry Wiggins (piano), Charlie Drayton (bass)

*Nightmare* (1956)

Director: Maxwell Shane

Screenplay: Maxwell Shane

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: Meade Lux Lewis (piano)

*Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959)

Director: Robert Wise

Screenplay: Abraham Polonsky

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: Harry Belafonte (vibraphone/singer), Mae Barnes (singer), unidentified trio

*Out of the Past* (1947)

Director: Jacques Tourneur

Screenplay: Daniel Mainwaring

Studio: RKO Radio Pictures

Jazz personnel: Gerald Wilson (trumpet)

*The Secret Fury* (1950)

Director: Mel Ferrer

Screenplay: Lionel Houser

Studio: RKO Radio Pictures

Jazz personnel: Ernie Royal (trumpet)

*The Strip* (1951)

Director: Leslie Kardos

Screenplay: Allen Rivkin

Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Jazz personnel: Louis Armstrong (trumpet/singer), Earl Hines (piano)

*Sweet Smell of Success* (1957)

Director: Alexander Mackendrick

Screenplay: Ernest Lehman, Clifford Odets

Studio: United Artists

Jazz personnel: Chico Hamilton (drums)

*They Live By Night* (1949)

Director: Nicholas Ray

Screenplay: Charles Schnee, Nicholas Ray



Studio: RKO Radio Pictures

Jazz personnel: Marie Bryant (singer), Billy Hadnott (bass), Elmer Fane (clarinet/sax), Hosea Sapp (trumpet), Vic Dickenson (trombone), unidentified piano and drums

*The Unsuspected* (1947)

Director: Michael Curtiz

Screenplay: Ranald MacDougall

Studio: Warner Bros.

Jazz personnel: Jo Jones (drums), unidentified sidemen

*When Strangers Marry* (1944)

Director: William Castle

Screenplay: Philip Yordan

Studio: Monogram Pictures

Jazz personnel: Lorenzo Flennoy (piano), Marie Bryant (dancer), Lennie Bluett (dancer)

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